Mirror Mirror

An Ever After High Zine

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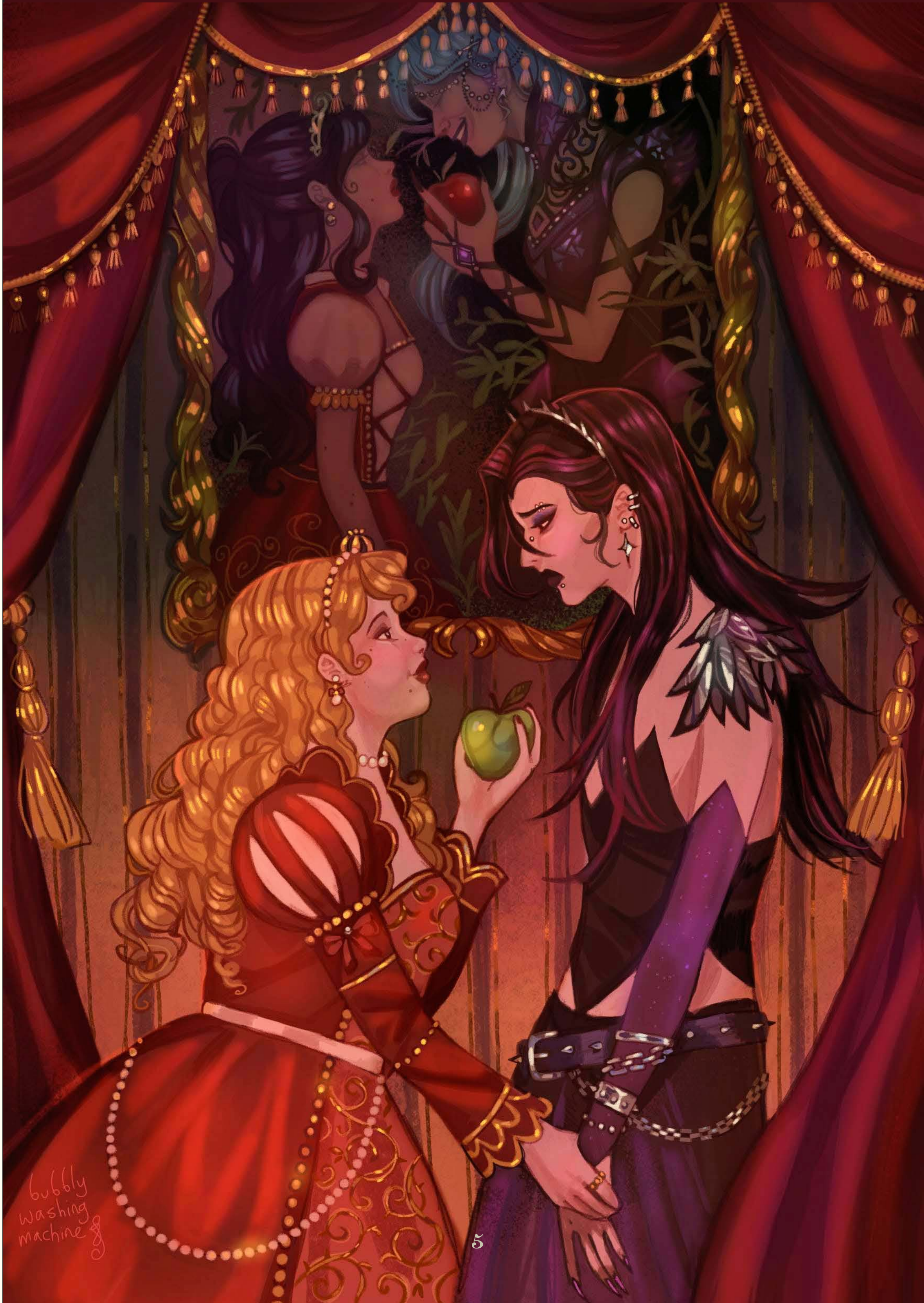
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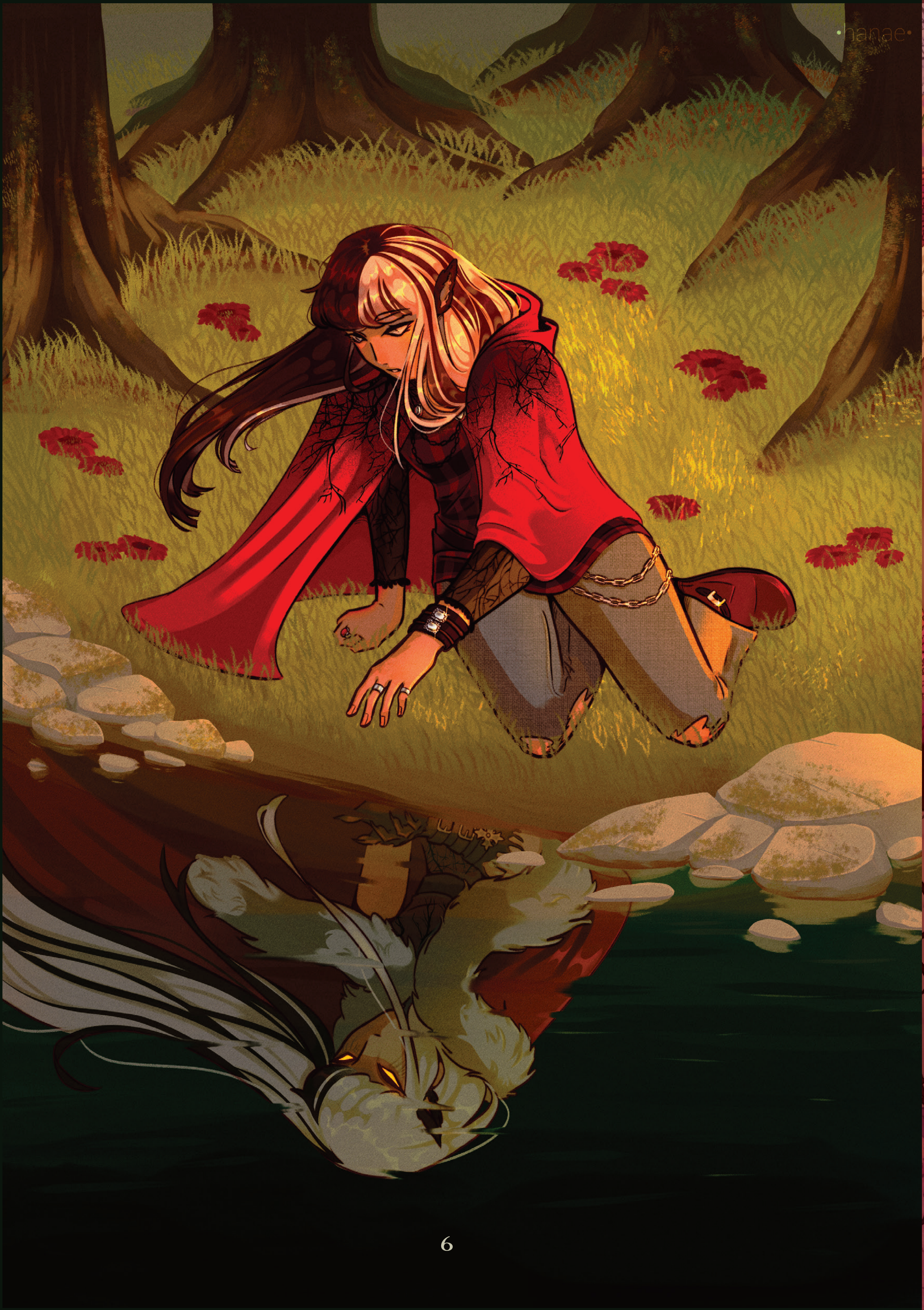
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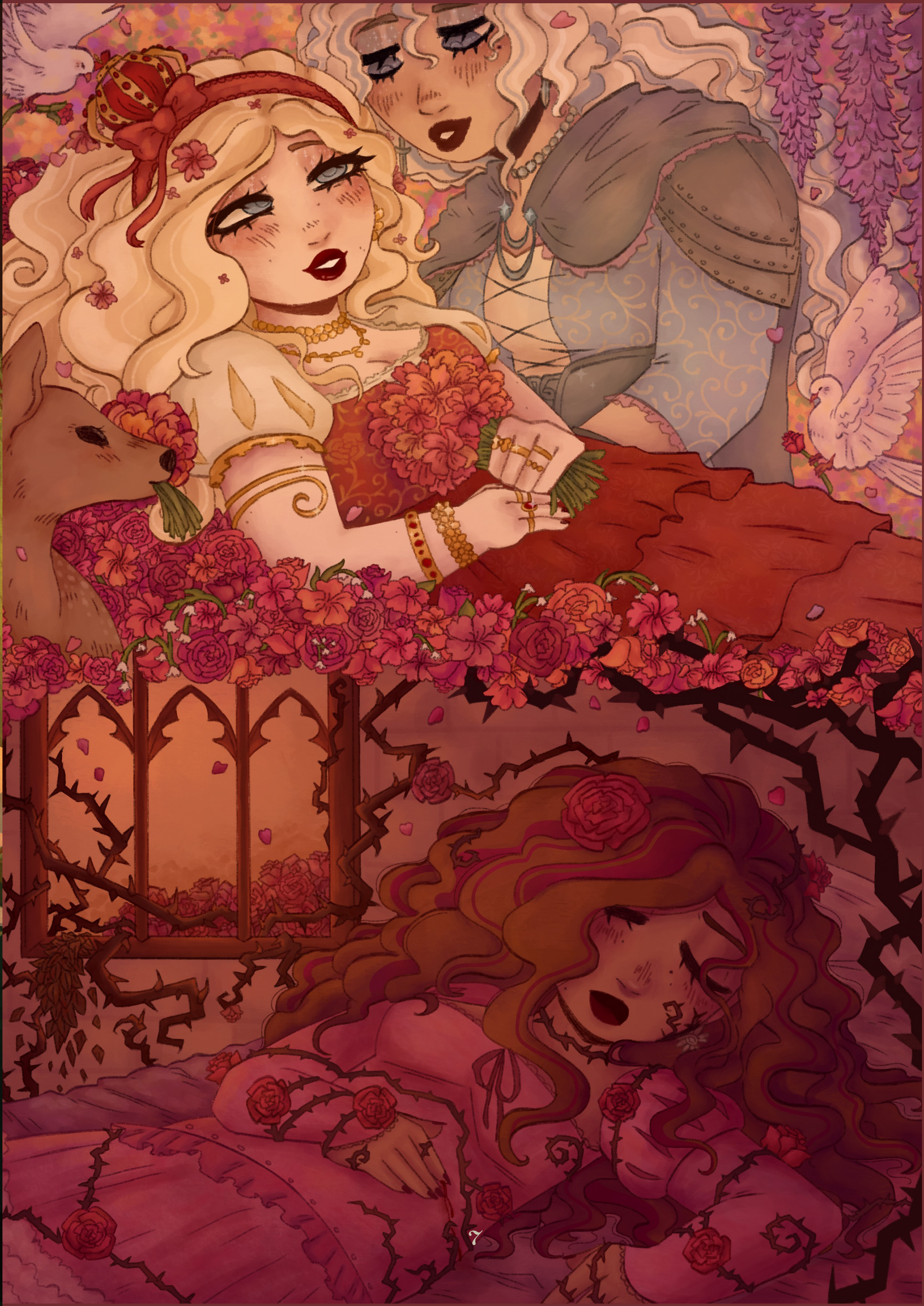
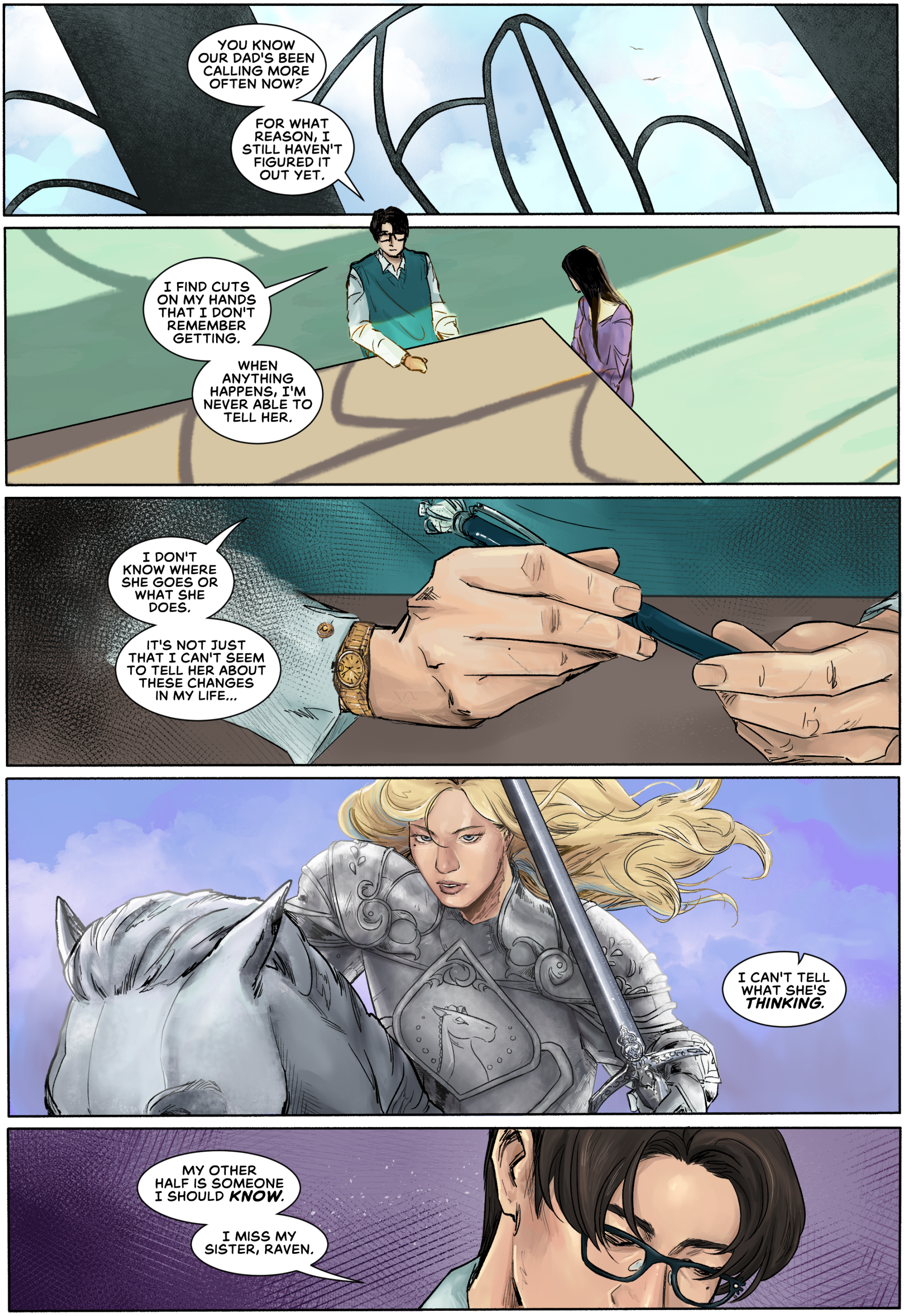
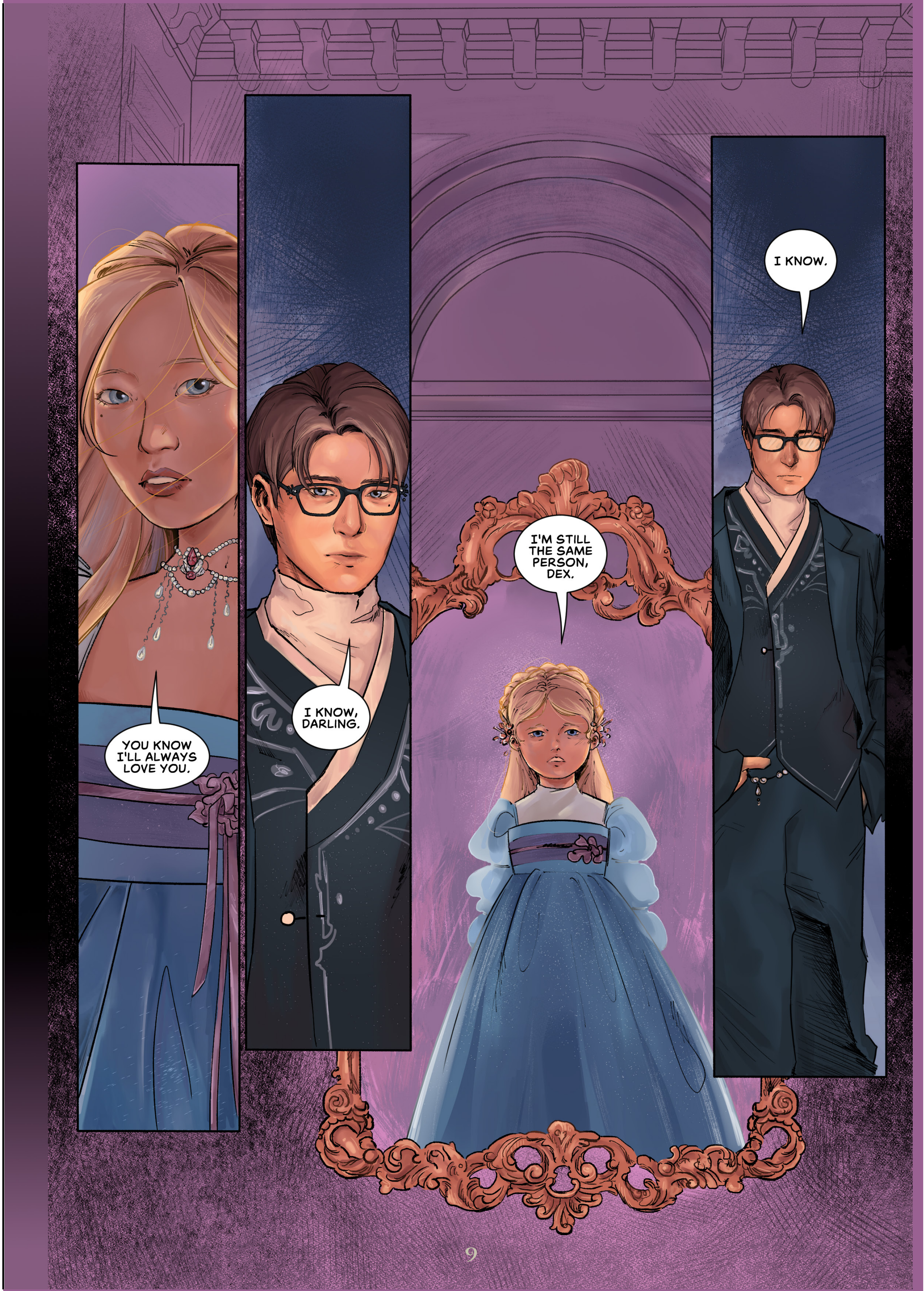



YOU KNOW OUR DAD'S BEEN CALLING MORE OFTEN NOW?
FOR WHAT REASON, I STILL HAVEN'T FIGURED IT OUT YET.
I FIND CUTS ON MY HANDS THAT I DON'T REMEMBER GETTING.
WHEN ANYTHING HAPPENS, I'M NEVER ABLE TO TELL HER.
I DON'T KNOW WHERE SHE GOES OR WHAT SHE DOES.
IT'S NOT JUST THAT I CAN'T SEEM TO TELL HER ABOUT THESE CHANGES IN MY LIFE...
I CAN'T TELL WHAT SHE'S ***THINKING.***
MY OTHER HALF IS SOMEONE I SHOULD ***KNOW.***
I MISS MY SISTER, RAVEN.


YOU KNOW I'LL ALWAYS LOVE YOU.
I KNOW, DARLING.
I'M STILL THE SAME PERSON, DEX.
I KNOW.

Love Me Through the Bars of a Golden Cage

by neon-sunsets

“I don’t know what you want from me,” Raven says, looking out across the sprawling grounds of the school. Behind her, Apple sits at her vanity, quietly counting as she brushes her hair.

“Some civility would be nice,” she says, putting down her brush.

Raven turns to look at her. “I am perfectly civil.”

“Really? I think Headmaster Grimm would —”

“Oh, please. This is what I mean, you know. I try to make you happy, but nothing I can do is enough.”

Apple stands. Raven turns to look at her, one hand gripping the stone windowsill. The distance between them, a mere ten paces, feels enormous. She wonders, idly, why they keep fighting.

“You do know what I want from you, Raven. You just won’t do it.”

Apple turns, and with a flip of her hair, she’s gone.

* * *

It’s impossible to walk the halls without wondering how her mother saw them.

The school has changed, of course. They’ve updated the floor tile, for one thing, and the big MirrorCast screens in the halls weren’t there thirty years ago. But the students, Apple thinks, have probably stayed the same. Everything cycles. Even the skirts her mother wore have gotten popular again.

She makes her way down the hallway, waving when appropriate, clutching a book to her chest in a manner she hopes is demure instead of hesitant. She catches a glimpse of Daring and Rosabella, and averts her eyes just in time. Seeing them together doesn't sting the way it should.

Apple is reminded of one of her mother's most important lessons. A princess, she'd said, must always gaze carefully. When Snow White walked to class, did her peers watch her? Did they stop in their tracks? Would they part to let her through a crowd?

Did she watch them, too?

Apple knows the answers. She walks the halls her mother walked. Her classmates watch her as she goes: they stop, bow, part to let her through. Her life is perfect. Everyone agrees.

Well, almost everyone.

Once, when they were fighting, Raven made a remark whose callousness still shocks Apple. At the time she had responded with the same cool composure she tries to maintain whenever she deals with Raven, but thinking back on it has always unsettled her.

"Your life is a beautiful cage," she had said, and looked at Apple in that way of hers. It's an expression they'll try to capture in stained glass, ten years on, as if to say, in warning, Look at how beautiful evil can be. Apple has seen the paintings and renditions of Raven's ancestors, of the ancestors of all fairytale villains. Beauty, she has learned, is not exclusive to Good.

Raven is wrong, of course. Apple's future stretches — stretched — before her, an endless dream. A husband (someone other than Daring, evidently), children, a kingdom. Everyone playing their part.

All she has to do to secure that course again is convince Raven of her folly.

* * *

Dexter won't get it. Maddie won't get it. Cerise might get it, but

Raven isn't sure Cerise is in a space to give advice at the moment. Ashlynn, of all people, would probably understand — except she's close with Apple, and Raven can't even imagine how bad it would be if Apple found out.

So instead she makes her way towards the library, intending to find a nook to hide away in. She takes the long way there, meandering outside along one of the school's many balconies. There are clouds in the distance, threatening rain.

Of all the horrible things her mother had attempted to convince her to do over their many supervised visits, loving someone she wasn't supposed to love was not one of them. Actually, that was the one thing her mother had done right. She'd fallen in love with — or at least married — Raven's father, and they'd had a daughter. Exactly as the story said.

Of course, her mother's story hadn't involved Apple.

She's just closed the balcony door behind her and started making her way down the wide hall when she hears a voice calling out to her, unmistakeable.

"Apple," she says. A hand lands delicately on her shoulder.

"Raven! Where are you heading?"

For a second she considers lying. But Apple is smiling with such genuine joy that she can't help but give in.

"The library," she says. "Do you want to study together?"

◆

The gazebo in the forest is, perhaps stereotypically, her favorite place to escape to. It's quiet and secluded and the animals always come up to her, resting at her feet or nuzzling into her hair. Apple is sure that, from afar, the scene looks like the dozens of stained glass windows scattered throughout the kingdom that depict her mother in the woods.

There are differences, of course. For one thing, Apple is blonde. For another, she thinks, she may be evil.

It should have broken her heart, is the thing. From the moment they'd met, everyone had assumed that Daring would be Apple's future Prince. This fact had been a constant presence in their admittedly strained relationship — but it had been constant. Stable. So it should have upset Apple to find out that he was promised to someone else. Should have devastated her, even. It didn't.

No, what is eating at Apple is far thornier than that.

If Darling Charming is Apple's future prince, that means she has failed. That means that, in order to secure her future according to the destiny she has been promised, she must break every tradition and every rule. That means that her destiny is a future she does not want.

Because what Apple wants is simple: a week of tragedy and then a lifetime of joy. A husband and children. A daughter with the same birthright.

That is what she wants, right? It's what she's supposed to want.

She thinks of Raven, and digs her perfectly manicured fingernails into the edge of the stone steps.

* * *

It happens like this:

One of Briar's ragers. A secluded balcony. Both of them high-strung and sort of euphoric and tired of pretending.

("I still never know what you want from me," Raven says.

I do, Apple thinks.)

The hazy outline of what she wants crystallizes into startling, beautiful clarity. In the leftmost drawer of Apple's desk, the text of a single book page changes.

* * *

"She's ignoring me," Raven says, facedown on Maddie's bedspread. "We live together. How can I go four days without seeing her?"

"Perhaps she's off on a merry-magic adventure," Maddie says. Raven lifts her head — she's taking tea with Earl Grey at her little table. "Little birdies do like to whisper in her ear."

Raven sits up. "I think I know where she is," she realizes, and heaves herself off of Maddie's bed. "I'll uh … be back?"

Maddie waves. "Have fun! Venture well!"

Raven takes off towards the woods, dashing down the stairs, ignoring someone — she thinks it's Cedar — calling out to say hi. The gazebo isn't very deep into the woods, and it's easy enough to find the path.

Slowing down, she takes a moment to catch her breath. Apple is, as suspected, sitting on the steps of the gazebo. A fox sniffs her hand. She looks up, and the sunbeams catch her careful, neutral face.

"Can I sit?" Raven asks, and Apple shifts ever so slightly in assent. Raven sits, trying to prevent their legs from brushing. "We don't have to —"

"No, Raven," says Apple. "It's not … it's not you."

Raven looks forward through the treeline, where the school peeks over the hill. "Isn't it?"

Apple sighs. "I wanted to pretend it was. But it was always me." The fox nuzzles against her hand and then slips away into the forest.

"If I had been told from birth that I had to be perfect, I think I might have the same perspective," Raven says. "Even so, what I did terrified me."

"Why did you do it, then?"

Raven glances back at Apple. "Because I knew I couldn't pretend anymore. And as soon as I did it, I got this … feeling. That it was the right thing to do, even though it scared me."

"I felt the same way," Apple says, very quietly. "When I … when we …"

"You did?"

"Yes." She looks up at Raven, and their eyes meet. She looks almost … fragile. "I didn't think you felt the same way."

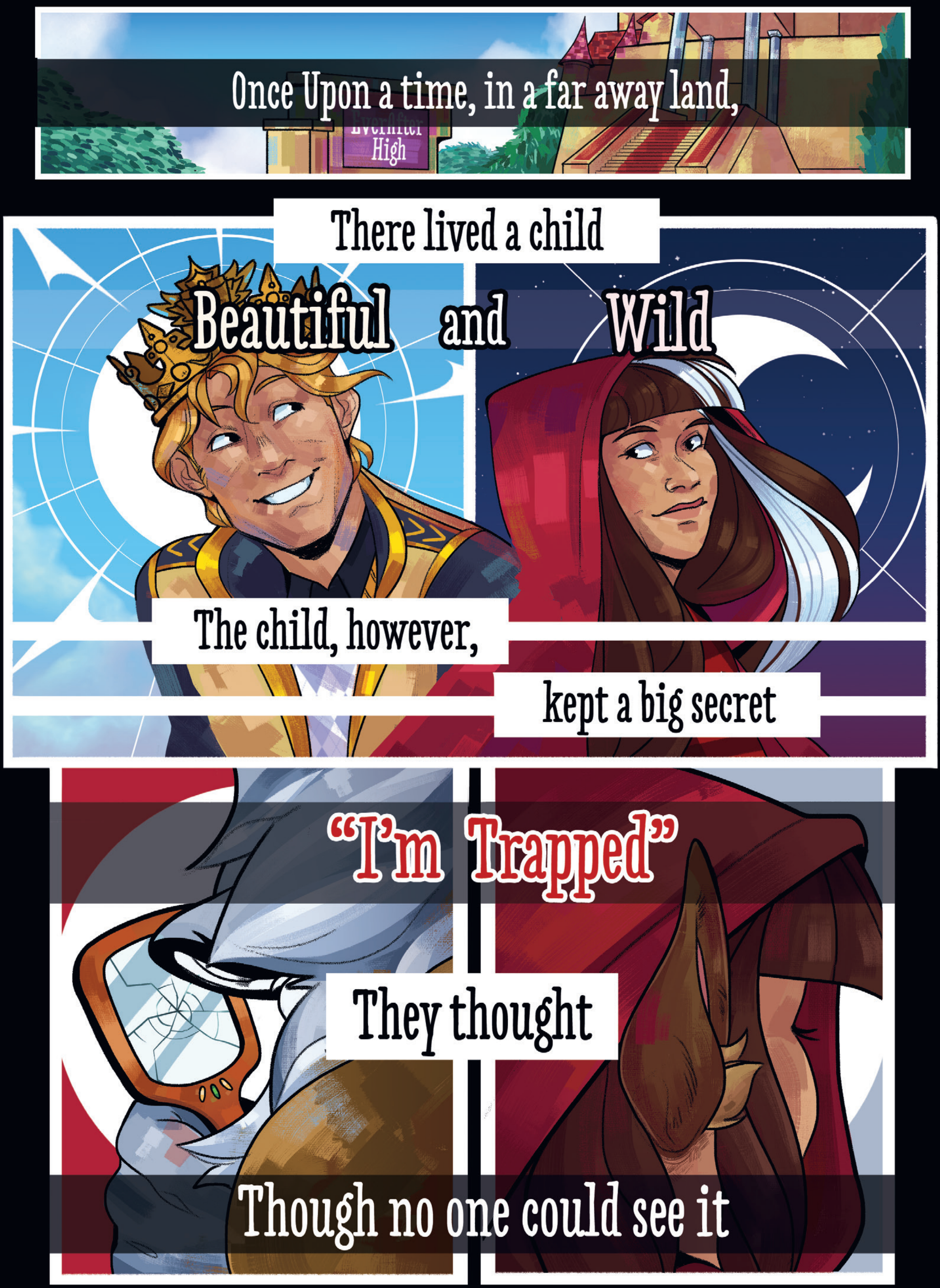
“I didn’t know,” Apple says. “After Darling, and Daring and Rosabella … I should have been upset about Daring’s destiny, or about my prince being a woman. But the problem wasn’t him, or that my prince was a woman, it was …”

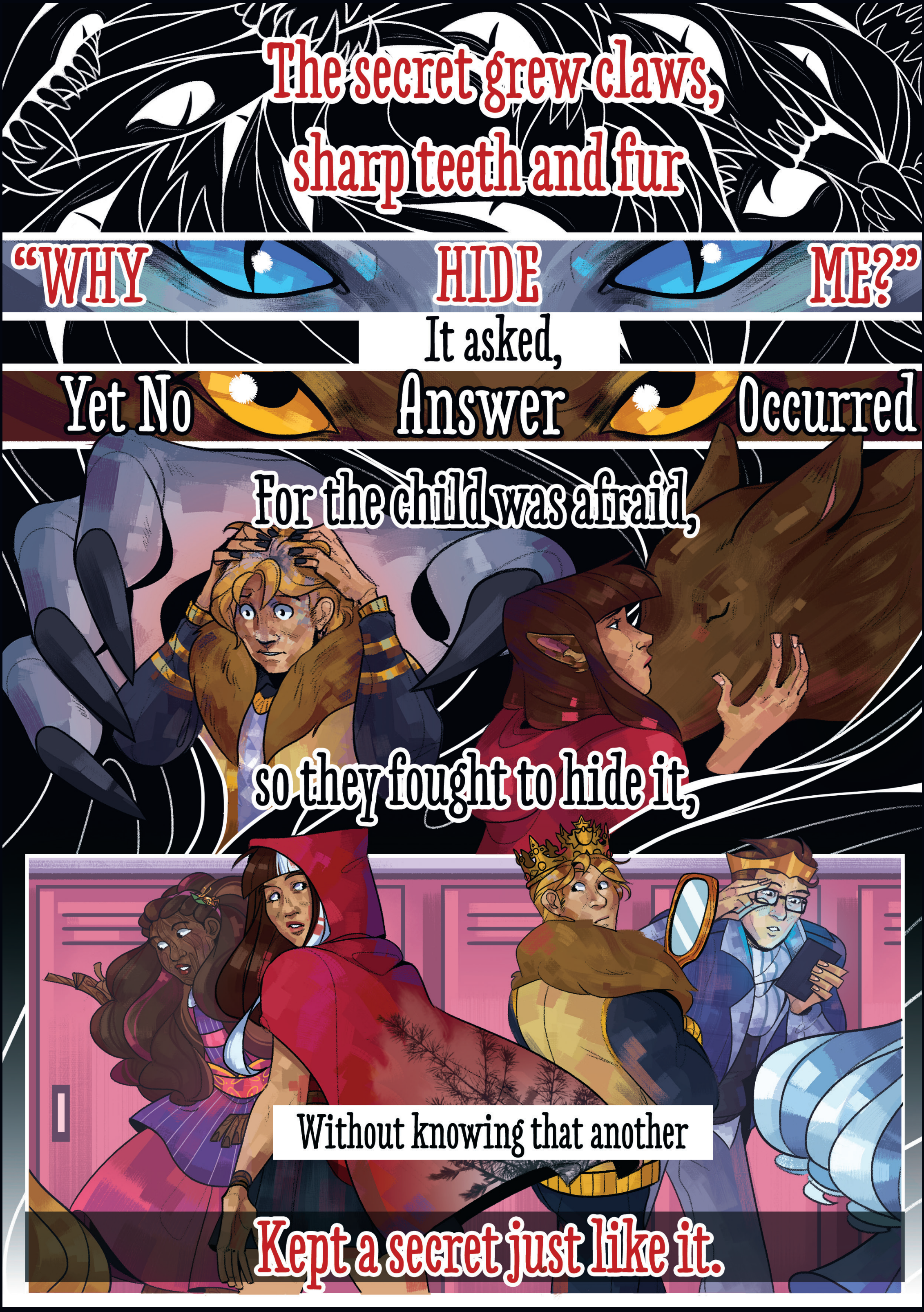
Raven puts a hand on Apple’s back. “You don’t have to say it. We have time.”

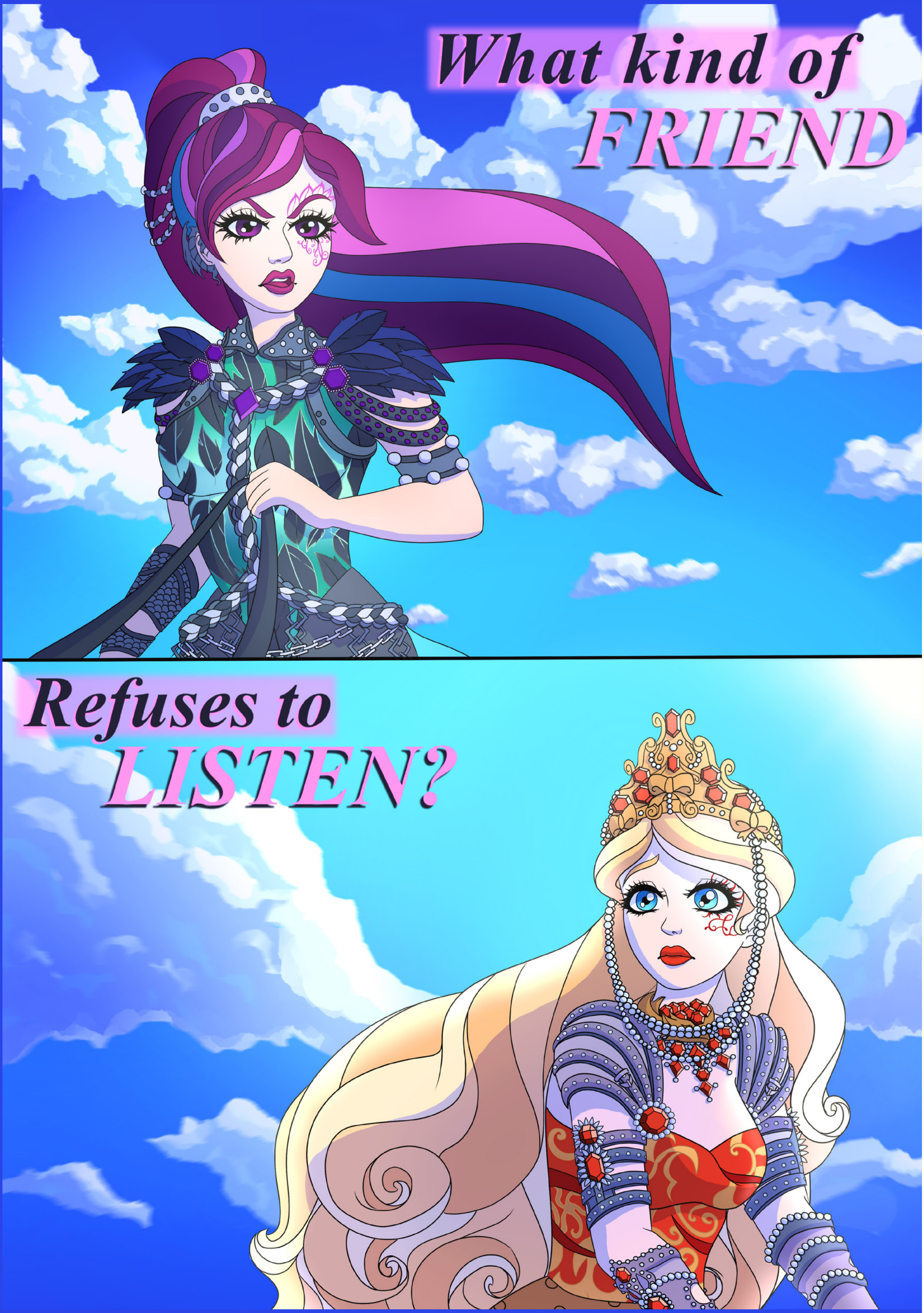
“Thank you.” Apple looks at her, then rests her head on Raven’s shoulder. “Someday I’ll be able to. For now … can we just stay here?”

“Yeah,” Raven says.

Apple takes her hand. It feels right.


Once Upon a time, in a far away land,
EverAfter High
There lived a child
Beautiful and Wild
The child, however,
kept a big secret
"I'm Trapped"
They thought
Though no one could see it


The secret grew claws,
sharp teeth and fur
"WHY HIDE ME?"
It asked,
Yet No Answer Occurred
For the child was afraid,
so they fought to hide it,
Without knowing that another
Kept a secret just like it.


What kind of
FRIEND
Refuses to
LISTEN?

Natural Habitats

by lesbianbriars

At school events, Duchess Swan floats. She exists in a rotation of unwelcome habitats: the snack table with princesses, the dance floor with princes, the edge of the stage with rowdy band members. She is an invasive species, a mute swan poking her beak into a herd of trumpeters, pretending she fits in despite her short wingspan and orange bill. She is a Royal, but not a Royal. She is a princess, but not a princess. She is a girl, but not a —

"Duchess!"

Duchess turns around with a weary sigh. "Apple," she greets. "Pleasure to see you."

"Yes!" Apple says, beaming big. The fun thing — the only fun thing — about talking to Apple White is that you can be as passive aggressive as you could possibly want, and out of a dedication to politeness she will never call you out or return the favor. It allows Duchess to, for a moment, indulge the illusion that she has the upper hand.

"Have you talked to Raven yet?" Apple asks, brandishing her roommate like an accessory.

"I haven't." Duchess smiles sharply. With Apple she's willing to keep up the niceties. With Raven she is not. "I don't usually talk to commoners."

Raven tries to pull away, but Apple's grip is made of iron. She sighs, eyes dancing and landing anywhere but Duchess's face. "Apple, maybe I should just go."

Apple looks at her frantically. "What? No, Raven, no!" She turns to Duchess with a huff. "Not that it matters, Duchess, but Raven *is* the

daughter of a queen."

"Oh, right, I forgot," Duchess says, mockingly apologetic. "She's just a villain. Which is, if you were wondering, one hundred percent worse." She gives Raven an up and down with a raised eyebrow. "You're not even, like, a *normal* villain. Your mom is totally murder crazy. I mean, any reasonable person has to wonder how much of that runs in the family."

"*Duchess!*" Apple says, positively aghast, and Duchess has to keep herself from grinning. "Raven is only as much like her mother as she should be. She's going to follow her destiny, and *only* her destiny."

Duchess's eyes flick to meet Raven's, violet and uncomfortable and uncertain. She scoffs. "Yeah, Apple. Okay. Keep telling yourself that."

Apple gasps.

"I'm… going to get a drink," Raven says, interrupting the conversation before it crosses the line from heated into dangerous. She wriggles her arm out of Apple's grasp and gives Duchess a look before she leaves. "Was as pleasant talking to you as always, Duchess."

Duchess gives her a smirk.

"You know, I really think you could stand to be nicer to people," Apple says once Raven has left their line of sight.

"Thanks, Apple," Duchess deadpans. "You can leave that in my suggestion box. I'll take it into consideration."

Apple sighs. "I'm just saying, maybe people would like you more if you weren't so terrible to them."

And just like that, Duchess is no longer having fun. She scowls deeply. "I'll see you around, Apple," she says, and continues her rotation.

If the crowds were unwelcoming before, they're just about hostile now. The cliques are so tightly knit there is no point trying to climb through one of the holes. She searches for an opening for just another moment before giving up her pathetic attempt to adapt and slipping into the auditorium girls' bathroom.

It's empty, and she's grateful. Her natural habitat — the only place in which she really belongs — is a room alone. She looks in the mirror, hands planted on either side of the sink. She's scrutinizing herself, checking her features for the things that make her stand apart.

Angular jaw. Large brow ridge. Defined chin. She traces the bridge of her nose with her finger. She wonders how much of this Apple takes note of when they speak.

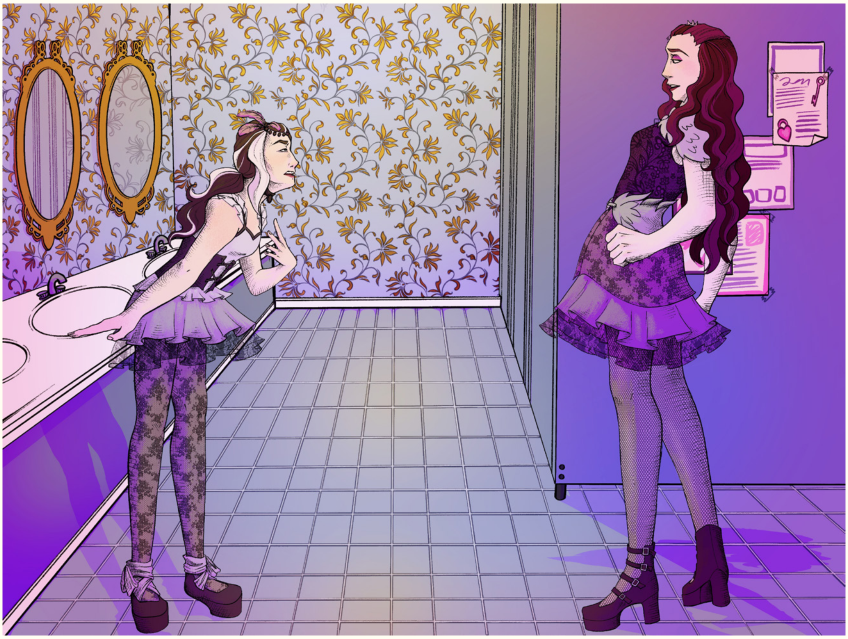
The door opens. She watches Raven enter in the reflection. She sighs deeply, turning around. "Oh." Raven stands awkwardly next to the stalls. "Hey, Duchess."

"Save it," Duchess says. "I was just leaving."

She starts toward the door, but Raven doesn't move. She stands still, rubbing her elbow, chewing on an already chapped bottom lip.

"I was just leaving," Duchess repeats. "Are you gonna let me?"

"You don't want your destiny either," Raven says, and Duchess's body



body goes cold.

"What?" she says, voice soft and dangerous.

Raven's eyes — still violet, no longer uncertain — slide up to meet Duchess's. "You don't want it. You're just like me."

Duchess's blood goes from icy to boiling in less than a minute. "I am *nothing* like you," she spits. "I — I'm…" She stammers, heartbeat quickening as she searches desperately for a response.

"I know how it feels, Duchess," Raven says, loud and rushed, like if she gets the words out quickly enough, if she says them with enough fervor, it will make Duchess any more likely to listen. "I know how it feels to be trapped. To have things ripped away from you. I — "

Duchess cuts her off, laughing. "Oh, no, Raven. No, you don't. You have no idea what it is like to have a fate like mine." She pouts mockingly. "Poor little Raven. She doesn't want to be *mean*! You know, she's just got, like, the worst destiny in the world, now doesn't she? It's gonna be so *terrible* to sit in that castle with her jewels and diamonds and her grimy little servants. Who would want that?" Her expression sobers. "You have *power*, Raven. You are not trapped. You don't have any idea what it's like to be trapped."

Raven is shaking her head. "No. No, I don't want that. I — I don't want power. I've never wanted power."

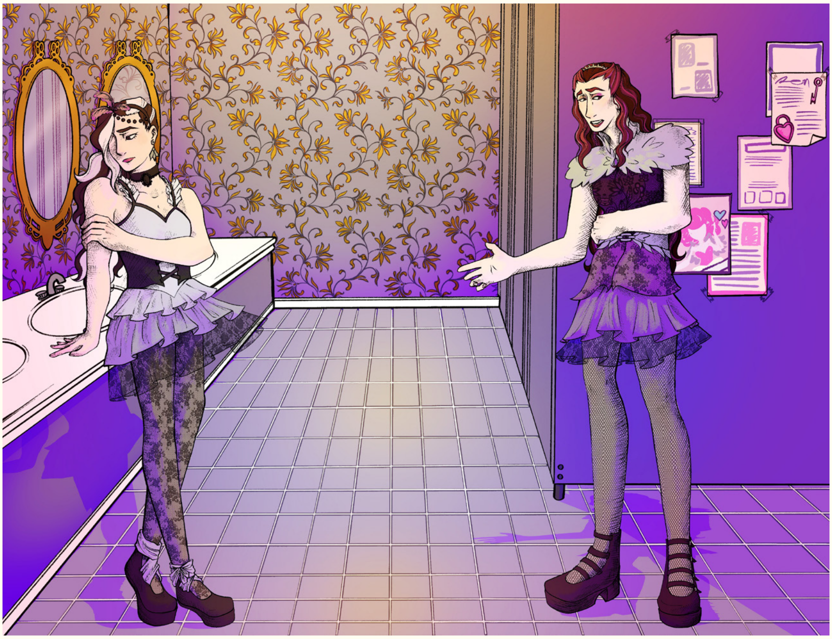
Duchess scoffs. "Everyone wants power."

"I'm not like my mother!" Raven yells suddenly. "I'm not — I would rather be dead than be like her, Duchess."

"It's so easy," Duchess says, voice rising, "to say you would rather be dead, when you don't have to die!"

"Duchess," Raven says, stumbling over the syllables. "Duchess, I have a plan. You don't have to die, okay? I'm gonna — I'm gonna get us out of it."

Duchess laughs, and it comes out shrill and desperate. "What are you

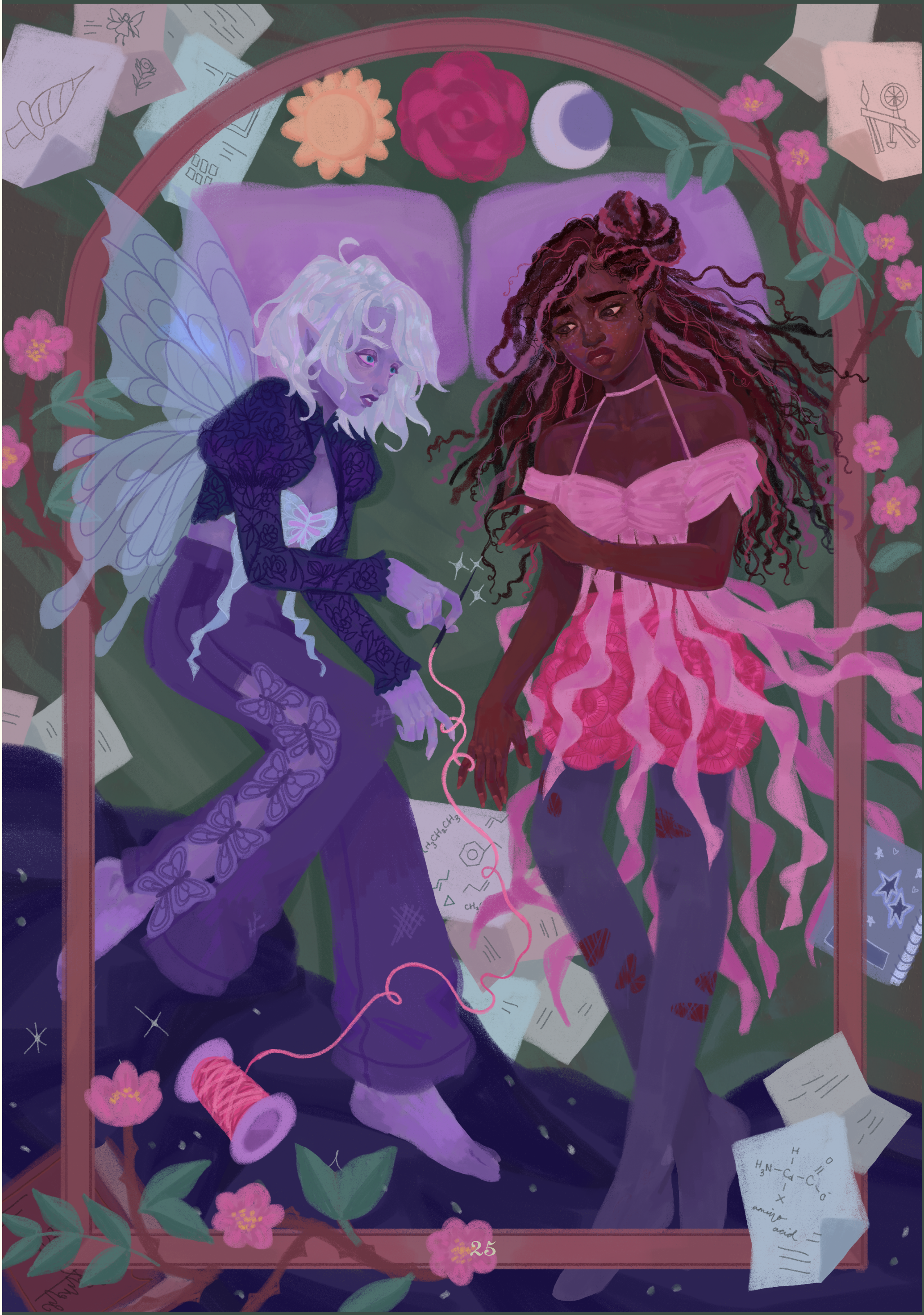


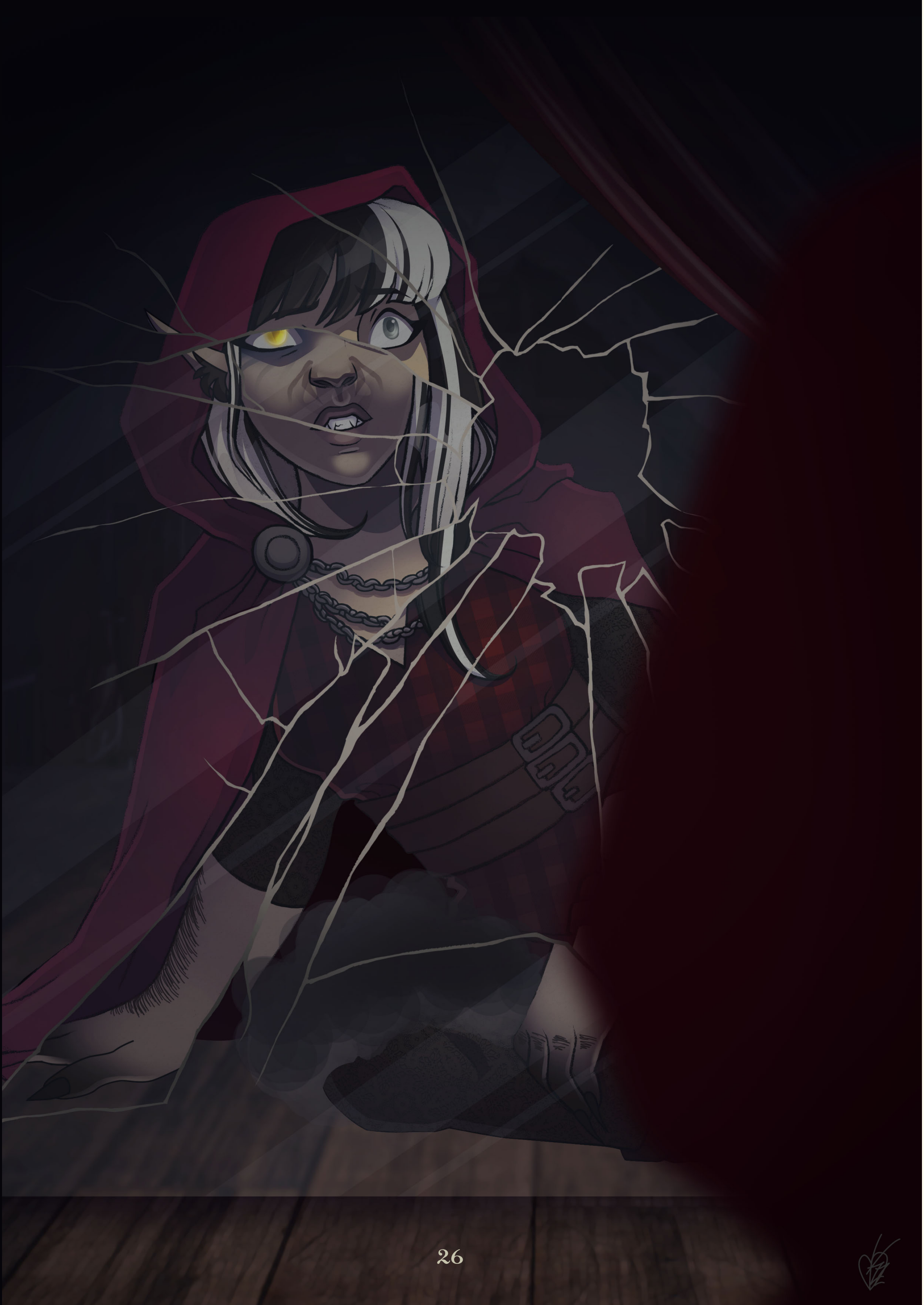
gonna do, Raven? Are you gonna run away? Are you just… not gonna sign?" She shakes her head. "You can't get out of this, Raven. There is no world in which we get out of this."

"Duchess — " Raven's voice breaks before she can finish.

"No. You are deluding yourself. And I'm not going to do the same." Duchess lets a moment of silence fall between them, then takes a breath, straightens her shoulders. "I'm done having this conversation."

She brushes past Raven, pausing just before she reaches the door. "I hope you have fun playing games," she says. "Visit my lake when you're queen, okay?" She doesn't wait for a response.


amino acid



Broke a Thousand Heirlooms

by naivesilver

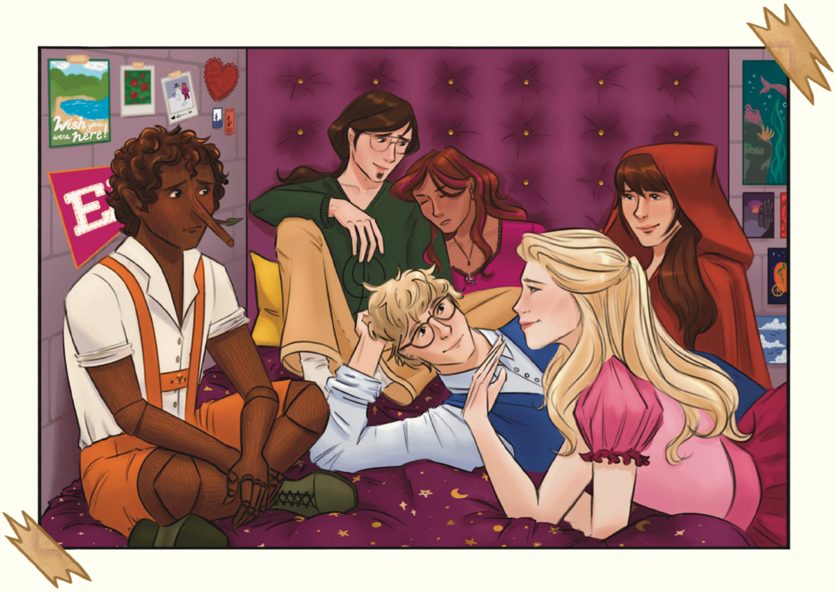
When Pinocchio was still a puppet, he once had his feet burned off.

It's not one of his fondest memories, understandably, but it's not the worst of them, either. He didn't feel pain or discomfort back then, not like in his current life, where turning around in his sleep means waking up with a crick in his neck – he understands, now, why his father would require a good push and some muffled curses to get up from the couch. Turns out age creeps up on you subtly, just like humanity.

The point is, he didn't suffer when it happened. By the time he got to Ever After High, he'd already received shiny new replacements for his lower limbs; it had become nothing more than a conversation starter, the perfect option when people had played Two-Truths-And-A-Tall-Tale up in the dorms, though Pinocchio himself was never too fond of the game. Kind of pointless to guess which sentence wasn't true, unless one tried to politely ignore the foot and a half of wood sprouting from the current player's face.

He didn't suffer, but he doesn't register how a great many things he went through should have been more painful until his daughter is up and walking, enchanted wood feet pattering against his workshop floor. It's only then that he starts feeling as if staring into a mirror, and he thinks, Ah, hex.

He's always known that his childhood and teenage years weren't always fairy desirable, both before and after signing the Storybook of Legends. He knew what he was signing up for when he had a kid, both



for himself and his daughter – his botched request to the Fairy made things harder, sure, but it's not like they were easy to begin with. Their destiny isn't often kind to children, and never has been, that he recalls.

And still, it sinks in when he least expect it to, this realization. Cedar takes her first steps, then runs, then begins climbing onto shelves and workbenches, and all Pinocchio can think about is that she might someday be required to put those lovely little feet in a brazier and fall asleep, if her story demands so. The girl chokes on a bite of food, because while she might not need to breathe, per se, her airways don't expand like a real girl's would, and her father's mind loops in circles around the rope that cut off his breath as he was hoisted up, up, up onto the tree branch. Whatever-after milestone his daughter hits, there's always a reminder that comes with it, one that tastes as sour on Pinocchio's tongue as the medicine he once had to swallow per his destiny's expectations.

It puts a damper on what ought to be cherished memories, and that's to word it mildly. He should be storing all these moments away before it's too late, before he has to step up to be Geppetto and leave the star-

starring role to his baby, but he can't. It's too much. It takes up entirely too much space in his mind, so much that sometimes he wishes he was still that silly little wooden head boy, so caught up in the wonders of the world that he couldn't even suspect what said world had in store for him.

In short, it makes time flow by at Pegasus speed. One minute he's crafting some dainty hands for a toddling puppet, and the next he's standing before the entrance of Ever After High once again, this time with a teenage girl by his side who's trying fairy hard to make him relinquish her luggage.

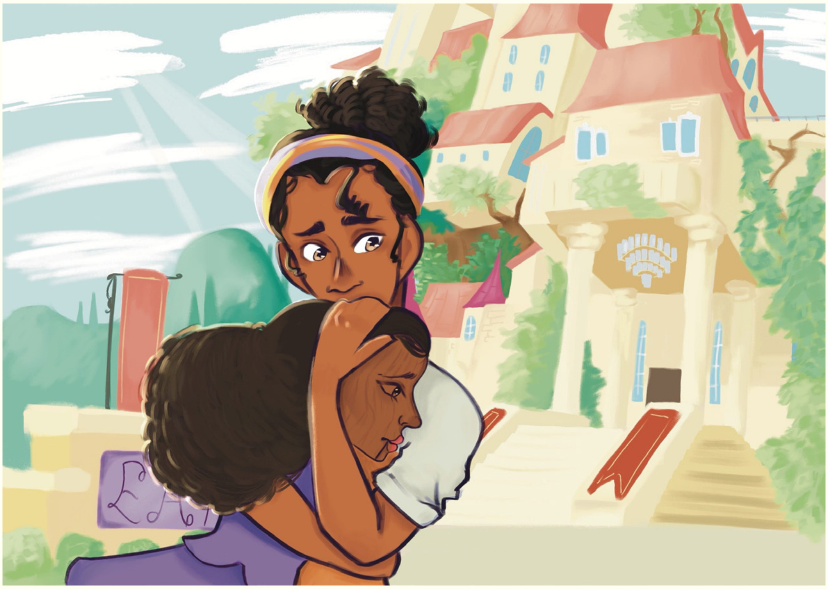
"Dad," Cedar says, as petulant as a sweet kid like her can ever get. "Come on, I can carry it myself-"

"Nonsense," Pinocchio dismisses her, smiling mischievously to cover his nerves. "I'm about to send you off for a whole year, I'm not going to speed it up- unless you're just trying to get rid of your poor old father?"

"You're not old. You're just fooling around."

That's true. He had her as a relatively young man, especially compared to his own father. It helps, in a way, because it means she'll soon be sharing classes with the children of his old schoolmates and thus won't be lacking friends, but it also implies that in about four years' time, when she graduates, he'll still be in his prime when he gets swallowed by a sea monster. Hopefully he won't miss too many workshop orders while he's away.

The thought, as it often does, becomes a hard lump in his throat, so instead of trying to swallow it down, Pinocchio sets his load onto the ground and engulfs the girl in a bear hug – one Cedar melts in immediately and without hesitation, her efforts to claim the luggage be damned. "So, little helper," he says, humorously but still soothing, "big changes, huh? Freedom Year. Take it literally, alright? Try stuff out. Get in all sorts of trouble. That's what Ever After High is for, so I won't be mad- as long as you tell me everything, that is. Don't forget about your old folks



toiling away and use that MirrorPhone from time to time."

"Fairy hard to get away with trouble when you have to tell people it was you," Cedar mutters, and then goes rigid in his grasp, a surefire sign that she didn't mean to say any of that.

It is a pang straight to Pinocchio's heart, but he can't afford to let it show, not until he's made it through the entrance ceremony and dropped his daughter off to her new dorm. In place of that, he simply presses a kiss onto her dark curls, hoping it conceals his face enough. "Ah, you'll find a way. We always do. You'll have to show all these stuffy princelings how it's done- they can't party without the puppet, anyway."

Cedar remains quiet for a long, long moment. Then, when Pinocchio is near sure she's about to let go, she whispers, so quiet it almost gone unheard in the hustling and bustling of parents and students around them: "Dad?"

"Yes, my girl?"

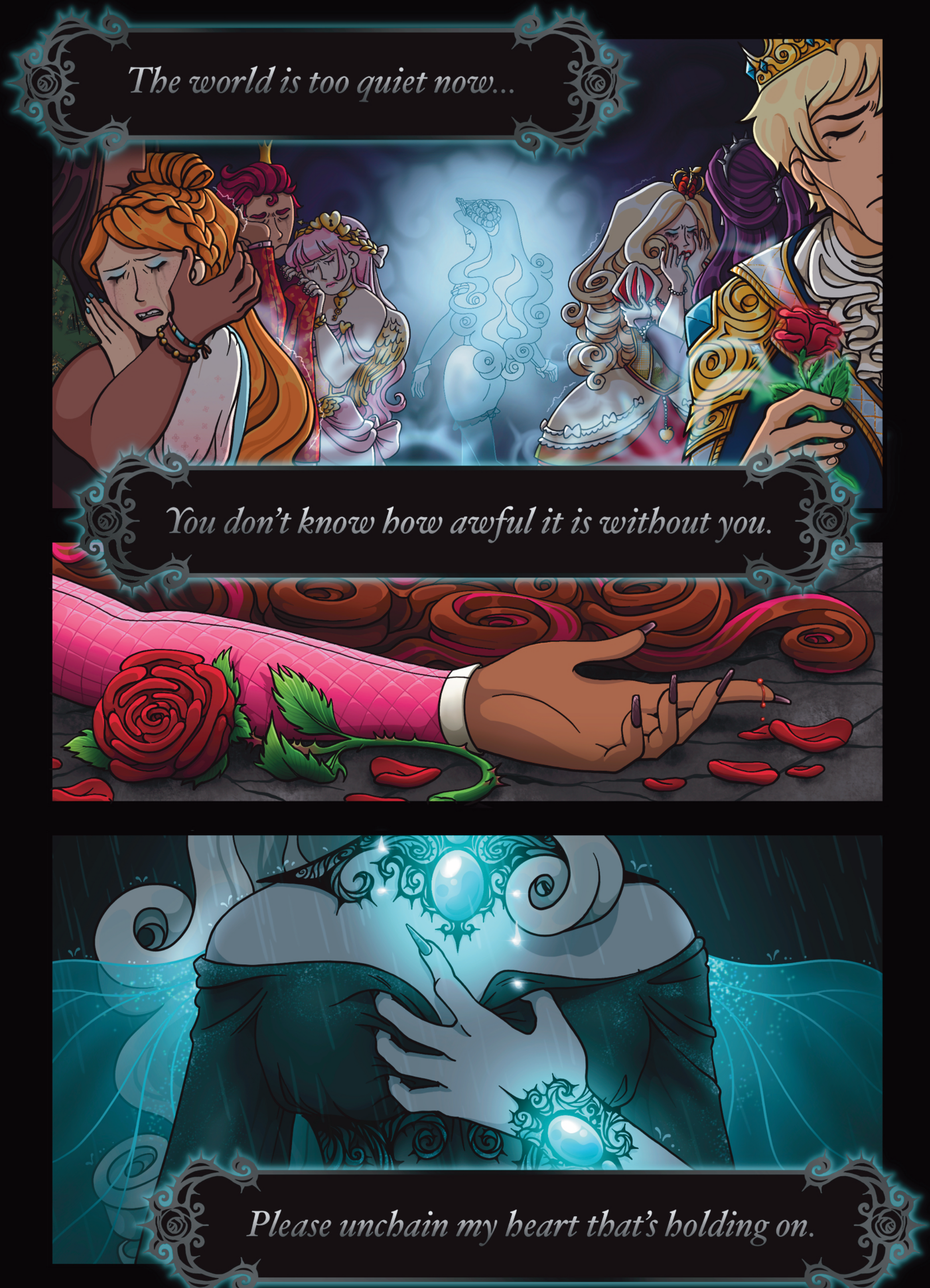
"Do you really think I'll be good at all of this?"

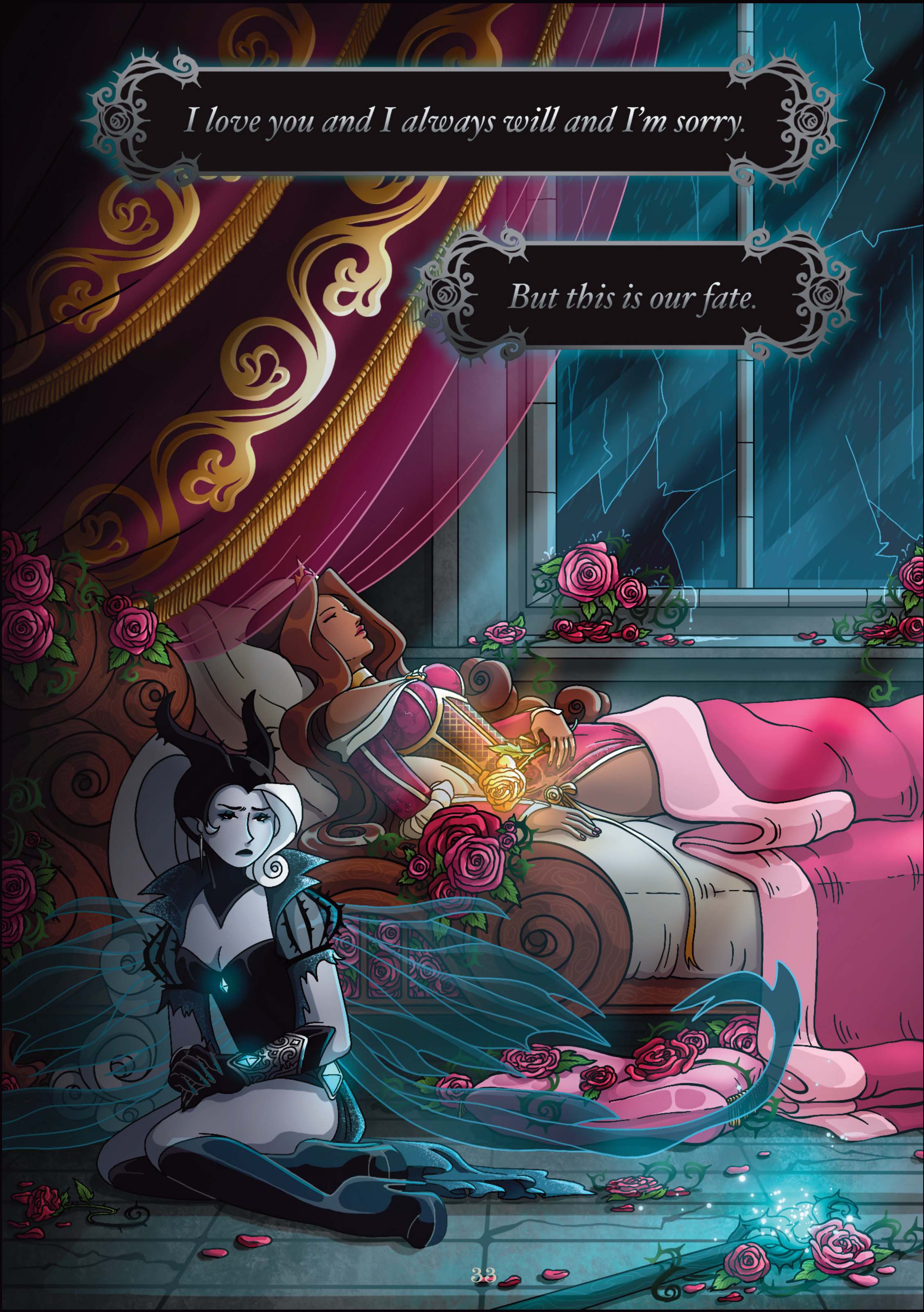
A part of him wants to tell her the truth. He wants, no, he needs her to know the truth – about all the times their shared destiny cost him some friends as a teenager, about how even those who remained slowly drifted away, swallowed by the new duties imposed by their stories. He needs to tell her that there are other means of unkindness and mindless cruelty people might throw at her, worse even than tourists coming to their little town to gawk at the walking, talking puppet.

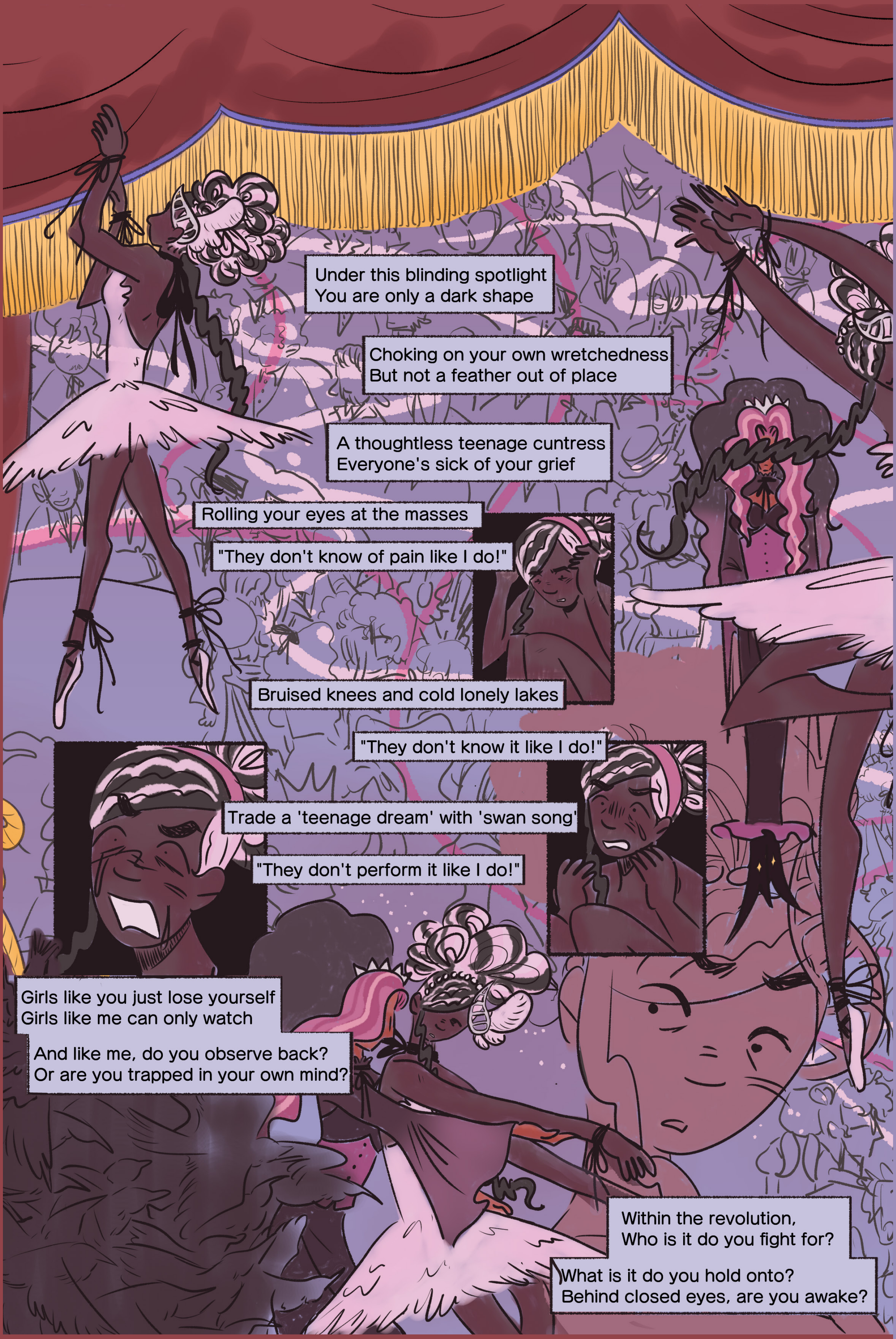
But he can't. That's his baby. He'll walk back into that burning hearth before he teaches her to be afraid of the world, or of those feet she's still standing on, solid and whole.

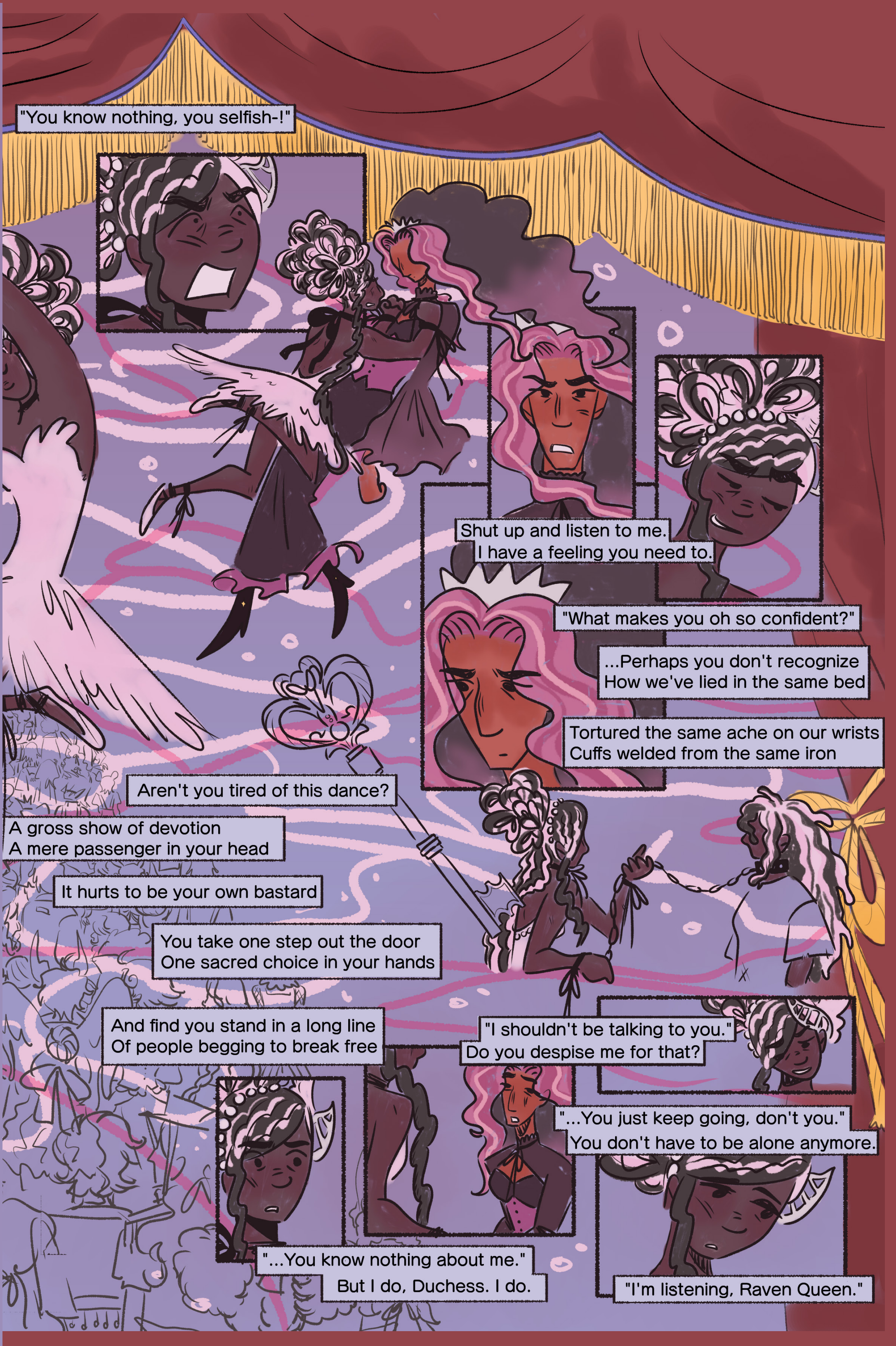
"I promise you'll have the best of times," he lies, and he hates how it comes as easy as breathing now, and he hopes his daughter isn't real enough to notice how hard he squeezes her for a moment, as if terrified to let her go.

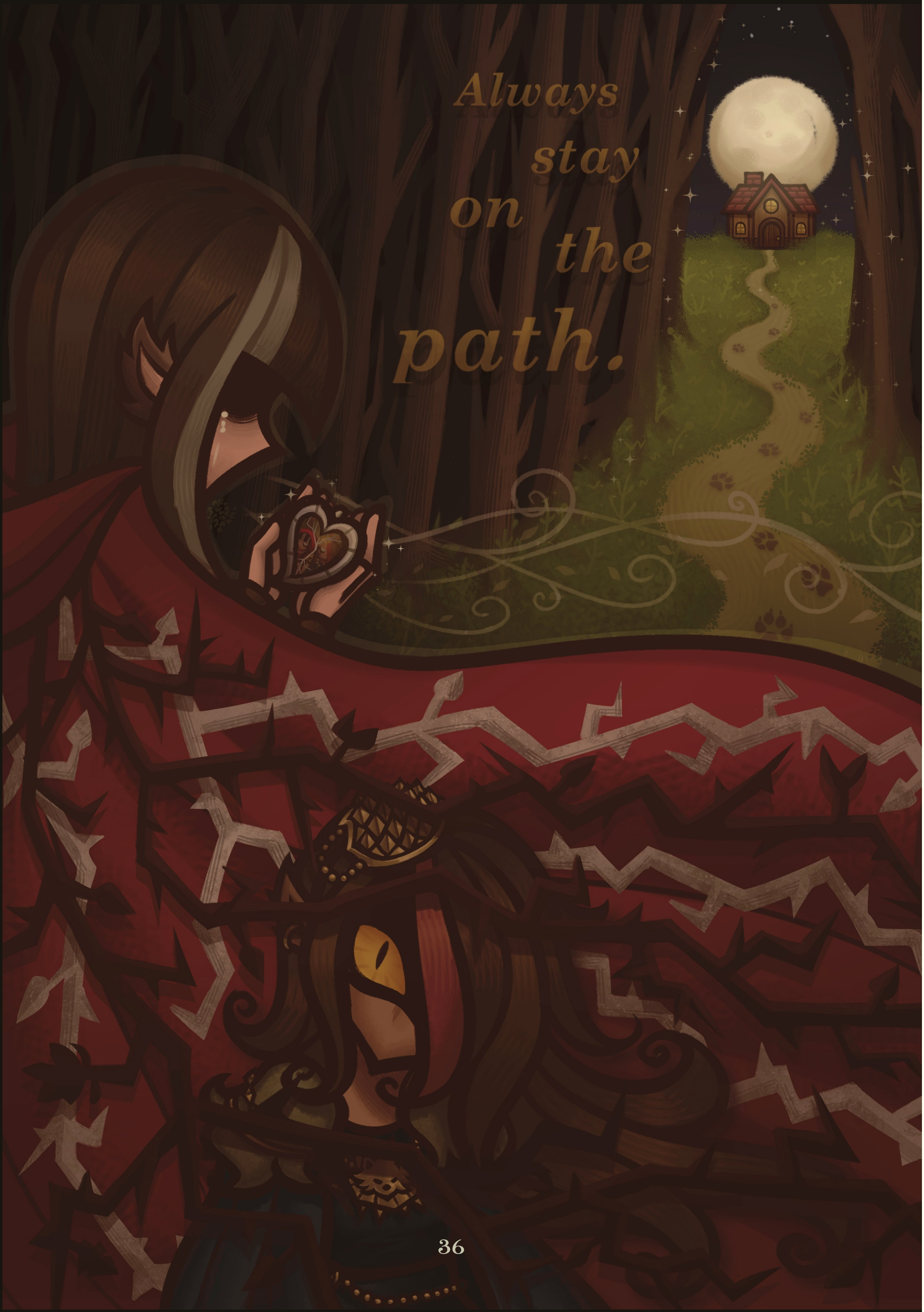
"Now, come on. I want to pick the best seats- they always gave us commoners the wonky benches, and I don't want to fall on my backside when the headmaster walks in. Not again."


The world is too quiet now...
You don't know how awful it is without you.
Please unchain my heart that's holding on.


I love you and I always will and I'm sorry.
But this is our fate.


Under this blinding spotlight
You are only a dark shape
Choking on your own wretchedness
But not a feather out of place
A thoughtless teenage cuntress
Everyone's sick of your grief
Rolling your eyes at the masses
"They don't know of pain like I do!"
Bruised knees and cold lonely lakes
"They don't know it like I do!"
Trade a 'teenage dream' with 'swan song'
"They don't perform it like I do!"
Girls like you just lose yourself
Girls like me can only watch
And like me, do you observe back?
Or are you trapped in your own mind?
Within the revolution,
Who is it do you fight for?
What is it do you hold onto?
Behind closed eyes, are you awake?


"You know nothing, you selfish-!"
Shut up and listen to me.
I have a feeling you need to.
"What makes you oh so confident?"
...Perhaps you don't recognize
How we've lied in the same bed
Tortured the same ache on our wrists
Cuffs welded from the same iron
Aren't you tired of this dance?
A gross show of devotion
A mere passenger in your head
It hurts to be your own bastard
You take one step out the door
One sacred choice in your hands
And find you stand in a long line
Of people begging to break free
"I shouldn't be talking to you."
Do you despise me for that?
"...You just keep going, don't you."
You don't have to be alone anymore.
"...You know nothing about me."
But I do, Duchess. I do.
"I'm listening, Raven Queen."


Always
stay
on
the
path.

For Whom the Rose Smiles

by dollmenace

Briar Beauty never balked at throwing herself on the dark, unknown abyss of a death-defying experience.

The thrill of Beanstalk bungee jumping, when she's up to a challenge, or riding a wild pegasus, if she's feeling bold, fills her with adrenaline and makes her forget, if only for a few seconds, that the life she built is just a signature away.

As the shock of the ruined Legacy Day ceremony wears off, though, Briar realizes she has met no true darkness until Raven Queen ripped her page off the Storybook of Legends and condemned everyone to a life stripped of the familiar path of fate.

Apple White took the betrayal the hardest. Sitting at the afterparty ballroom, surrounded by concerned princes and tearful, desolate damsels, she looks at Raven and her flock of Rebel friends with barely disguised disappointment.

In her fit of selfishness, Raven forgot there's no Snow White without an Evil Queen. That's how the narrative goes. Everyone's individual ambitions come second to the duty of keeping a story alive, and Raven certainly won't be the first or last person to think her pursue of happiness diverges from her destiny. She's just the only one self-centered enough to judge herself above all else.

Although she confides it to no one, Briar is also distressed by her role in the Storybook. The thought of sleeping for a hundred years and waking up in an unfamiliar world scares her, but before she begins to wonder

"Is that the road I want to follow?", a gentle voice reminds her: *There's no other road to follow.* The rigidity of fate is comfortable.

But if her future is not set on stone, as Raven seems eager to prove, that gives Briar the burden of making a decision — to betray her own heart and live the miserable life meant for her or to go against everything that she was taught and become the new object of contempt for everyone she holds dear.

She looks at Apple, her eyes puffy from crying but regal and determined all the same, and suddenly the dichotomy feels ridiculous. Whatever Briar chooses, she's going to lose her.

"Briar, are you feeling well?" Ashlynn Ella asks, her voice small and concerned.

Briar shakes her head, drawing Apple's attention. "I think I need some distraction. This noise... I can't think straight with all this noise."

Apple glances at the stage, where Raven performs with the Merry Men. Triumphant. Carefree. And so, so hopeful.

"I could ask them for a pause." She offers, but Briar shakes her head. She assures them she needs some air and quickly leaves the ballroom and her friends' worried faces behind.

Outside, the wind is colder than Mama Bear's porridge. Briar wraps her heirloom cape tighter against her shoulders, trying to escape the night breeze without returning to the main lounge, where she is sure to find more sophomores speaking ill of Raven Queen and her band of rebellious friends.

The terrace feels cozy and inviting, adorned with pastel roses that Briar herself ordered and set with a full table of drinks and snacks from the Mad Hatter Tea Shop. It's a shame all her effort went to waste. The tea had been Apple's idea. A compromise, to cheer up Raven after the ceremony.

The eccentric Madeline Hatter, who took their order, insisted on a special tea that Briar now observes on the table. The clear liquid looks no different than water, but the teacups almost call to her, whispering in a Wonderlandian obscure tongue.

A distracting sound stands out from the rest, high heels crossing the marble floor. Briar turns back to find Raven, alone, looking guilty but no less imposing in her mother's crown and cape, despite trying her hardest not to be.

Raven makes a subtle gesture to leave, but seeing that it's impractical to avoid Apple's friends forever, she offers Briar a feeble smile and moves towards the table.

Briar reciprocates the smile but keeps her distance, as if Raven is as unpredictable and menacing as her heritage suggests. There is something dangerous about her, like a spindle that draws her in despite the promise of a sting. It makes her stomach churn in a way no adventurous whim of hers was ever able to.

"Rebels. Is that what you're going with?" Briar blurts out, masking her growing nausea with a feigned interest for Maddie's mysterious tea.

Raven shrugs. "It rolls off the tongue."

"You have some guts to come here. Apple is inconsolable."

"I know." Raven pauses, reaching for a teacup and gently caressing the handle as a child would do with a beloved toy. "I meant it when I said I was sorry, but I couldn't force myself to live an unwanted life out of fear."

Heart thudding in her chest, Briar retorts, "You think this is what bind us to our stories? Fear?" "I'm sure this is what kept things unchallenged for so long.'

Briar lets out a frustrated, breathy laugh. If Raven is right, it means the future she was promised - the future she came to terms with - is a lie and she must figure out what comes next on her own.

But if Raven is wrong...

Briar brings a shaking hand to a whispering teacup and takes a reluctant sip. If Raven is wrong, things stay the same. This is not a concern worthy of the future Sleeping Beauty, with her fortunate upbringing, loyal friends and a Happily Ever After lying ahead.

Murmuring a strange song in response to the teacups, her sharp features cast in the pale moonlight, Raven closes the distance between them and takes a deep drink. Under Raven's touch, the clear infusion changes to a milky, harpyflower tea with a layer of cream. Raven hums.

Unusual, but comforting.

Briar takes it as one of her spells, until her own drink gets warmer to the touch. Surprised, she watches it convert into a dark, misty rose tea sprinkled with crunched petals. It's sweet at first, but as Briar swallows it a bitter taste overwhelms her and almost makes her gag.

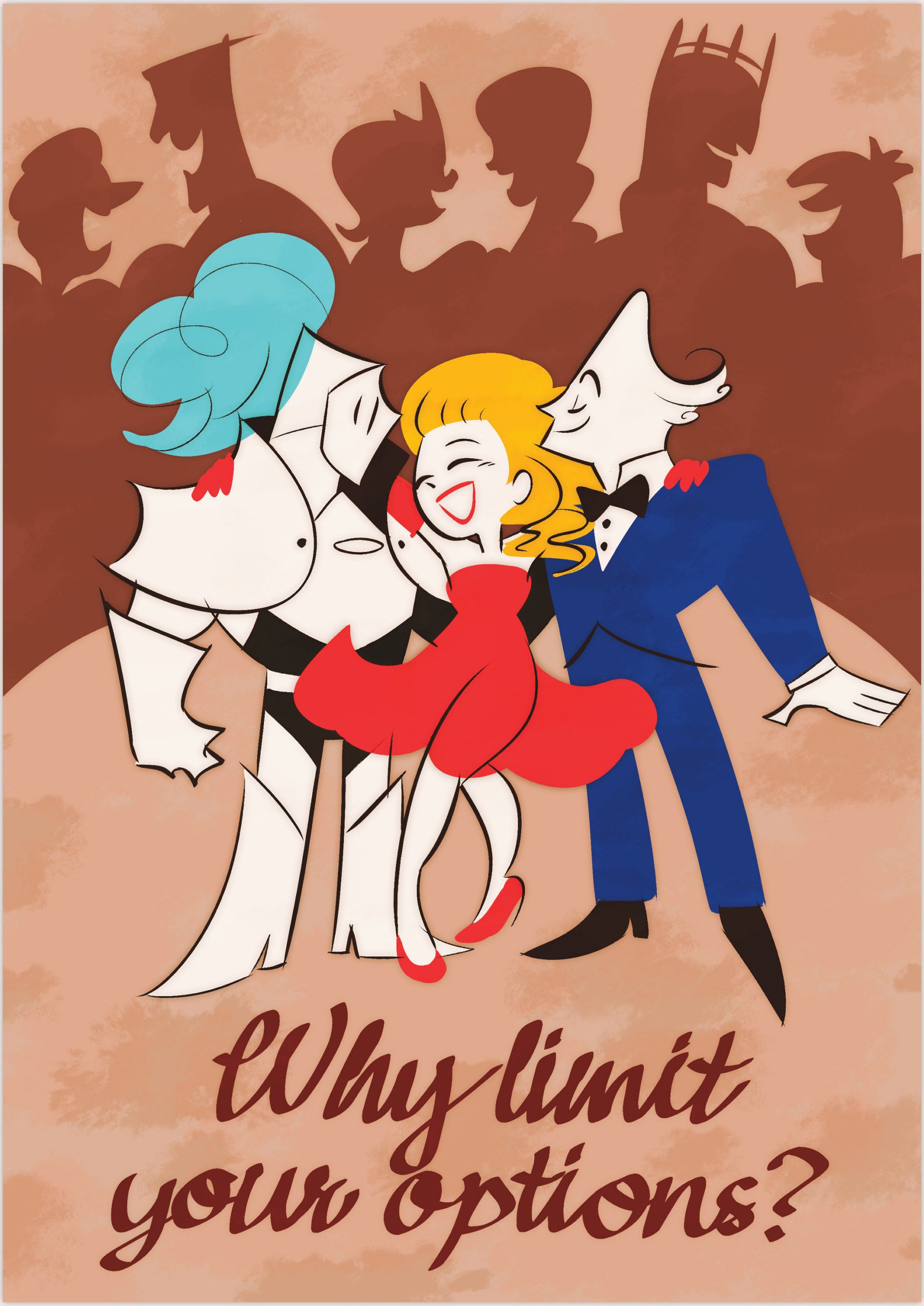
Raven must have noticed, because she puts her teacup aside and gives her a gentle nudge. "Maddie's crystal tea. It helps us keep in touch with our emotions. What does yours taste like?"

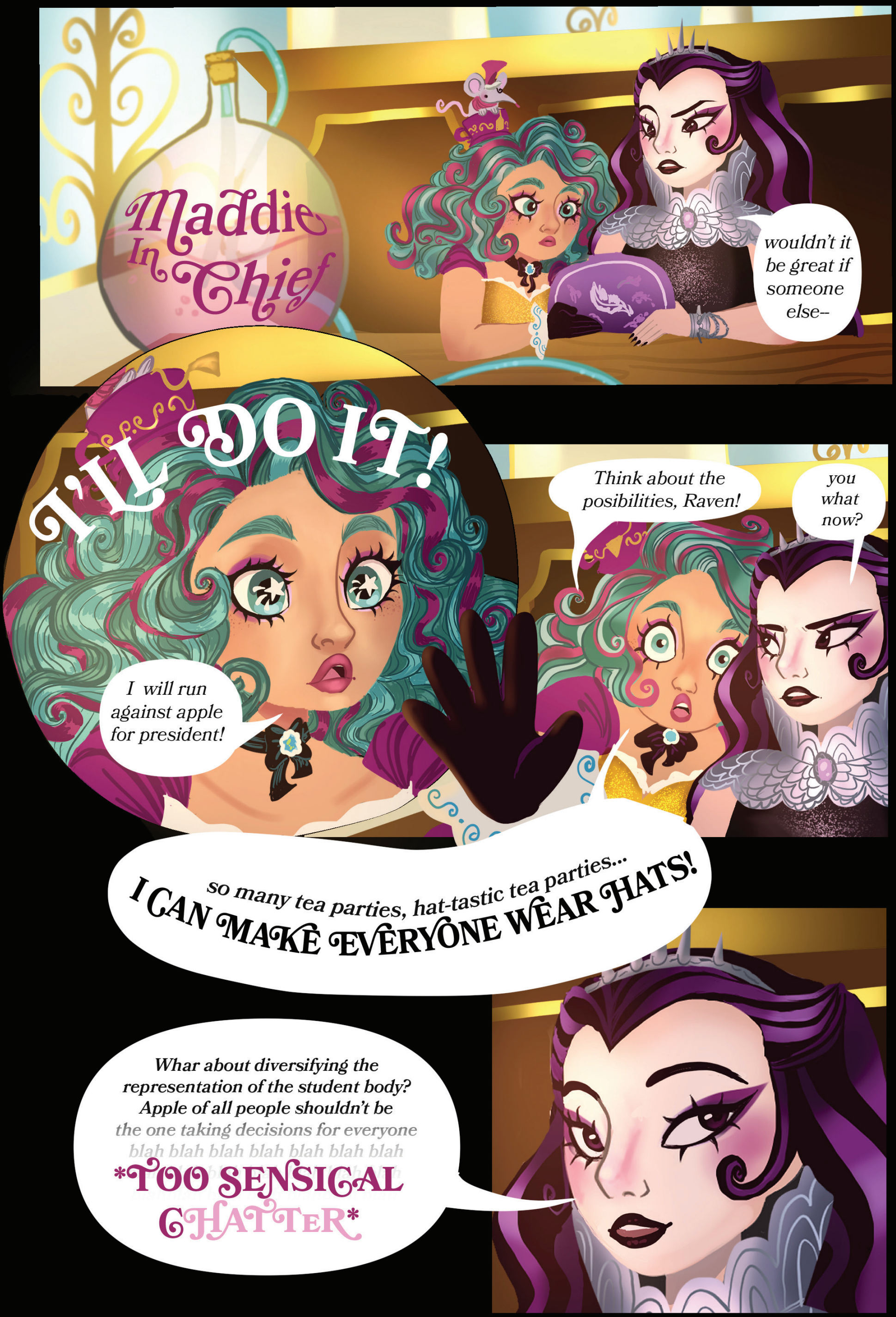
Wordlessly, Briar meets her eyes. She swears it tastes of indignation on behalf of her friends, of the loss of everything that is known and safe, but certainty is Apple's comfort, not hers.

She chalks it up to resentment, then. She resents Raven for acting out of her scripted part, if only because Briar now knows there is an alternative road, conceivable but entirely out of her each.

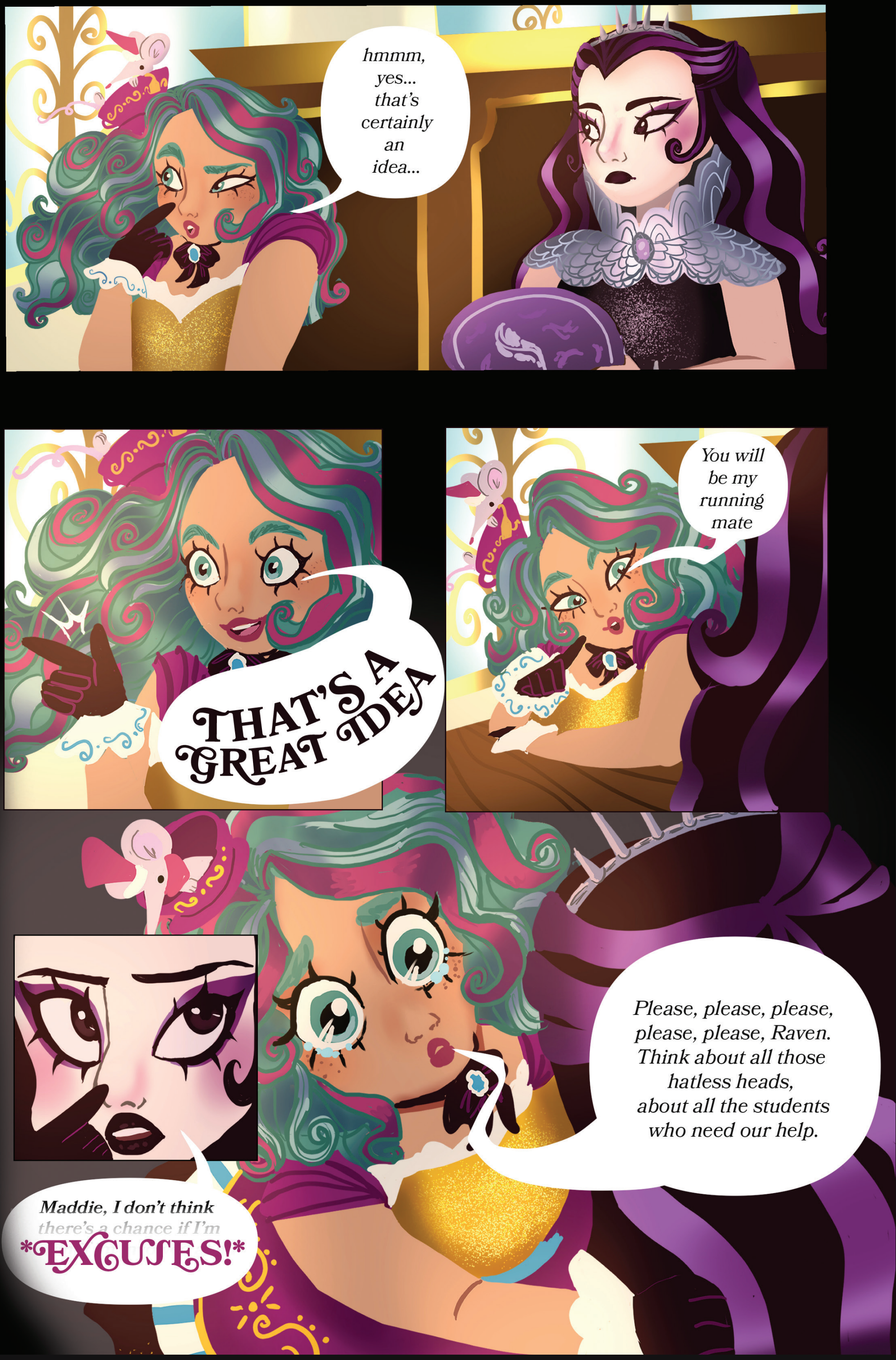
"Whatever it is, I'll see it through." Briar says, adjusting her lace cape and getting ready to return to the ballroom.

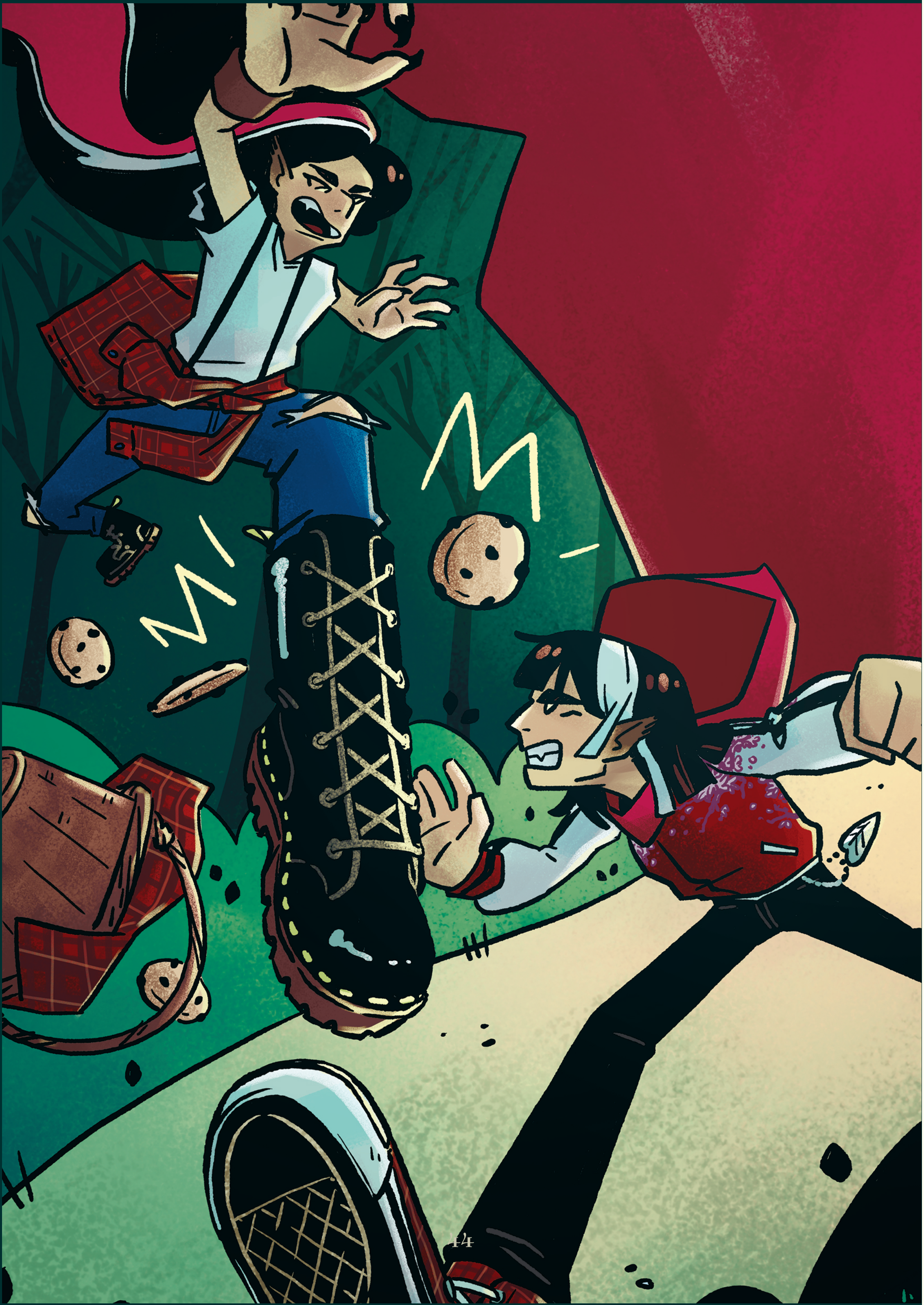
She may not know what this overwhelming bitterness means, but it strikes her much like regret, and deep down, though Briar knows it will only lead to bottled up tension, she fears it calls for a change of heart.


Why limit your options?


Maddie In Chief
wouldn't it be great if someone else--
I'LL DO IT!
I will run against apple for president!
Think about the posibilities, Raven!
you what now?
so many tea parties, hat-tastic tea parties...
I CAN MAKE EVERYONE WEAR HATS!
Whar about diversifying the representation of the student body? Apple of all people shouldn't be the one taking decisions for everyone
blah blah blah blah blah blah blah
TOO SENSICAL CHATTER

42


hmmm, yes... that's certainly an idea...
THAT'S A GREAT IDEA
You will be my running mate
Please, please, please, please, please, Raven. Think about all those hatless heads, about all the students who need our help.
Maddie, I don't think there's a chance if I'm
EXCUSES!



Cast Beyond the Moon

by hoodhollow

Ramona didn't hear about the big Basket Run until weeks later, when she came back from school.

"Hey Mom," she said, stepping into their little cottage at the edge of the Dark Forest with her suitcase trundling behind her.

"Ramona!" Her mother put aside the cup she was measuring to give her daughter a floury hug. Ramona scrunched up her sensitive nose, and managed not to sneeze. "Welcome back! How was the trip? You must be hungry."

"Yeah, I am," Ramona said, because she was a Wolf and that meant her stomach was effectively bottomless. "And the trip was fine. Well. Actually, I came back through the village and didn't hear a word from anyone about torches or pitchforks. Is something going on?"

"Oh, that..." Her mother pulled back. "It's a bit of a tale. Let's get you something to eat first."

It didn't take long for Ramona to turn a meat pie to crumbs and join her mother at the kitchen counter. "So, what's the news?" She snuck a pawful of fairyberries from a basket. "It can't be that big, can it?"

"Your sister visited on Yester Day," her mother explained, pressing cubes of butter into her flour mix. "The Hoods and the Wolfs were at it again, and her friend got a little caught up in the mob. Cerise rescued her by revealing her wolf powers in front of everyone."

Ramona choked on a fairyberry.

"They were going to banish her, but she won her Basket Run trial over both sides. Ten baskets, and she was the first to break the finish vine!" Her mother grinned proudly. "That's when things started to change around here."

Ramona's ears twitched, and her eyes were wide. She still hadn't gotten past the first part. "Cerise did that?!" Ramona had never expected she could be so bold. "Why is this the first I'm hearing of it?!"

Her mother pushed a bowl across the counter. "Well, dear, you know how news doesn't spread far from town."

Ramona took the bowl, frowning as she added berries and stirred in eggs and cream. Yes, okay, no one here ever talked to outsiders or used the MirrorNet. But why didn't Cerise tell her? A heads-up hext, just a quick, *hey, jsyk I told everyone about our parents and destroyed the cultural divide between the two sides of our family, laters,* would have worked. It would have been some warning, at least.

She said cautiously, "Does this mean we don't have to hide anymore?"

And Ramona's hope was extinguished under her mother's regretful smile. "The rest of the world…it's still not safe for you."

The same words she'd heard all her life. And Cerise was probably right back to hiding under that hood, too. Revealing the truth to one small village didn't mean anything when that village was as reclusive as Hood Hollow. And the worst part was, even if Ramona tried to take control of her destiny, she still couldn't do what Cerise had done. No matter what her mother said, nothing ever really changed. She dumped her dough out onto the counter and kneaded it fiercely.

They put the scones into the oven, and her mother said, "Oh, I forgot to mention."

Ramona's head whipped around. "There's more?" she demanded. Since when was this place so eventful?

"We had a letter from Headmaster Grimm," her mother said. "He's welcoming you back, if you'd still like to transfer."

Ramona was suspicious. Grimm had made it clear that the Badwolf got the blame for that fight, and hadn't seemed willing to reconsider.

"Why now?"

"I suppose he's trying to reinforce your roles," her mother said. "One student refused to sign the Storybook of Legends and upended Legacy Day."

Well, well, well. Ramona's eyebrows went up. Maybe things were changing after all. "Then I guess I'm going to Ever After High."

* * *

Cerise hadn't known about the transfer until everyone was already whispering and Ramona was right in front of her, showing teeth. She still had no idea how she'd been the last to hear about it. She had super wolf senses, for crying out loud. Ramona was her sister, for crying out loud! A quick heads-up hext would have been nice. But no, apparently Ramona only knew how to use her MirrorPhone when she wanted something.

hey do me a favor

Cerise, who'd been fuming over a popped volleyball for the six hours since class ended, was not inclined to be doing Ramona any favors. The hexts kept coming anyway, piling up on her lock screen.

Justine's breaking into Mme Yaga's office

like

right now

and you know those dancing princesses they always get caught

appreciate if you could swing by and pick her up

I'd do it myself but I'm not the one with the hood

Ugh. Well, she had to help now. But first, some retribution: *My, what big morals you have. shut the hex up,* Ramona sent back.

The rescue went off without a hitch. Back in her dorm, Justine explained that she'd risked her permanent record because Duchess Swan was cheating at the talent show. At Cerise's incredulous look, she added that it was for her sisters, who'd all fought for the recognition of winning the competition, and lost. "I can't let my family down," she said.

Cerise looked at her own sister, lying across the room and pretending to be asleep. Fame wasn't an issue with their story, but they were only allowed to represent one half each. She could see how wanting that acknowledgment might make someone reckless. Still, "Getting into trouble won't make them proud," she said, advice for Ramona as much as Justine. She wanted to say more, but Justine didn't know their secret, so she settled for, "Don't lose sight of what's important."

Hopefully that was enough to get through to them—Ramona, especially. If she actually cut it out with the snide comments and the property damage and those *fairies-cursed smirks,* Cerise would consider it a job well done.

* * *

Ramona really had meant to ease up a bit. It was only the decent thing to do after Cerise had come through on that favor. But. Well.

Ramona had already learned during the sleep-dancing incident that things would never go so smoothly when she was the one trying to be helpful. It was yet another thing Cerise could do that she couldn't. And then they'd bumped into each other over the last piece of bacon in the Castleteria, and one thing had led to another, and now Blondie Lockes was announcing to anyone with a MirrorPhone that the two of them would be brawling after class.

Not what she'd planned, but Ramona couldn't say she hated the idea. Cerise had always been competitive, so maybe she would finally show off for more than just their tiny little town.

Unfortunately, there was a downside, and that was Hunter Huntsman waiting at her locker. "Ramona," he pronounced, "you need to call off the fight with Cerise."

Ramona said, "It's none of your business, Huntsman."

"Well, as a Hero in Training," Hunter said, posing with his hands on his hips, "and the hero of Red Riding Hood in particular, I believe it is my business."

Of course it came down to that. Ramona rolled her eyes and yawned. "What, she asked you to protect her helpless damsel self from the big, bad villain?"

Hunter sheepishly admitted that she had not asked for his help.

"Just butting in for your own sake then," Ramona concluded.

"Wolfs are a lot stronger than Humans," Hunter said, crossing his arms. "You fighting Cerise is royally unfairest and we both know it."

He didn't know what he was talking about. Oh, no, the daughter of the Big Bad Wolf just *had* to be bullying the poor little Hood—Ramona wanted a fair fight more than anyone else! But that depended on whether Cerise was willing to bring it for real, so Ramona, as always, would just have to wait and see.

She reached out, sending Hunter jumping back, and yanked open her locker. "Like I said," she growled, "it's none of your business. Fight's still on."

◆

Cerise had braced for a lecture as soon as she'd caught her dad's scent in the Enchanted Forest. He'd already had to break up her and Ramona's fight, and now here she was, off-campus and out past curfew. But he stayed silent as he stepped from the treeline and threw something at her instead.

She snatched it out of the air on reflex—a thick, old tome, bound at the corners with fraying rope. "Bookball?"

"Up for a few passes with your old man?"

Cerise wasn't about to turn down time with her dad, even if she was still a little mad. The book traveled back and forth across the clearing in short, easy tosses, and she let herself relax into the *whoosh* and *thump* of each throw.

“I wanted to tell you,” her dad said, “about the race,” and Cerise almost fumbled her catch. “I appreciate that you let your sister win.”

She hadn’t exactly had a choice, when the whole school turned out to watch. There would have been questions for a human who could keep up with a Wolf. But even though it was necessary, and nice that her dad recognized what she’d done, it didn’t erase the sting to her pride.

“You’re welcome,” she muttered, trying to hide her frustration, and her next throw went high. Her dad sprang up to catch it. “But I don’t think it did much to help you girls settle your differences.”

Not really, considering Ramona had taken her winner’s rights as an opportunity to make zero changes to her behavior. Cerise caught the bookball and said nothing.

“Come on, pup, what’s going on?”

“I just—!” Cerise spiked the book, sending it bouncing off into the bushes. “She’s so *mean*!”

“Remember that everyone expects her to act a certain way,” her dad pointed out. “I growl at you in the hallways too, don’t I?”

“She doesn’t growl at me, Dad,” Cerise grumbled, but she didn’t know how to explain what it was about Ramona’s petty inconveniences that raised her hackles. Eventually, she said, “You’re just having fun. She’s *trying* to make me mad. She knows why I have to wear the hood, and we’ll *both* be in trouble if our secret gets out, but I’m the only one actually trying to keep it while she gets to do whatever she wants!”

“Ramona doesn’t get to do whatever she wants,” her dad said.

“Sure feels like she does,” Cerise muttered.

He asked, “What about last year, then?”

Cerise bit her lip and glared at the forest floor. Okay, fine, the last time they’d fought, and hadn’t been interrupted, Cerise had been handed a detention slip and Ramona had been expelled. Maybe that didn’t count, but she still had plenty of steam left.

Her dad let out a big, gusty sigh. “I’m sorry, Cerise. When your mother and I went off-book, we didn’t realize how difficult it would be for you two.”

That startled her out of her temper. “It’s not your fault,” Cerise hurried to assure him. “You didn’t make the rules.”

“But we did make a choice,” he said. “And so did you, when you showed your Wolf side to the village.”

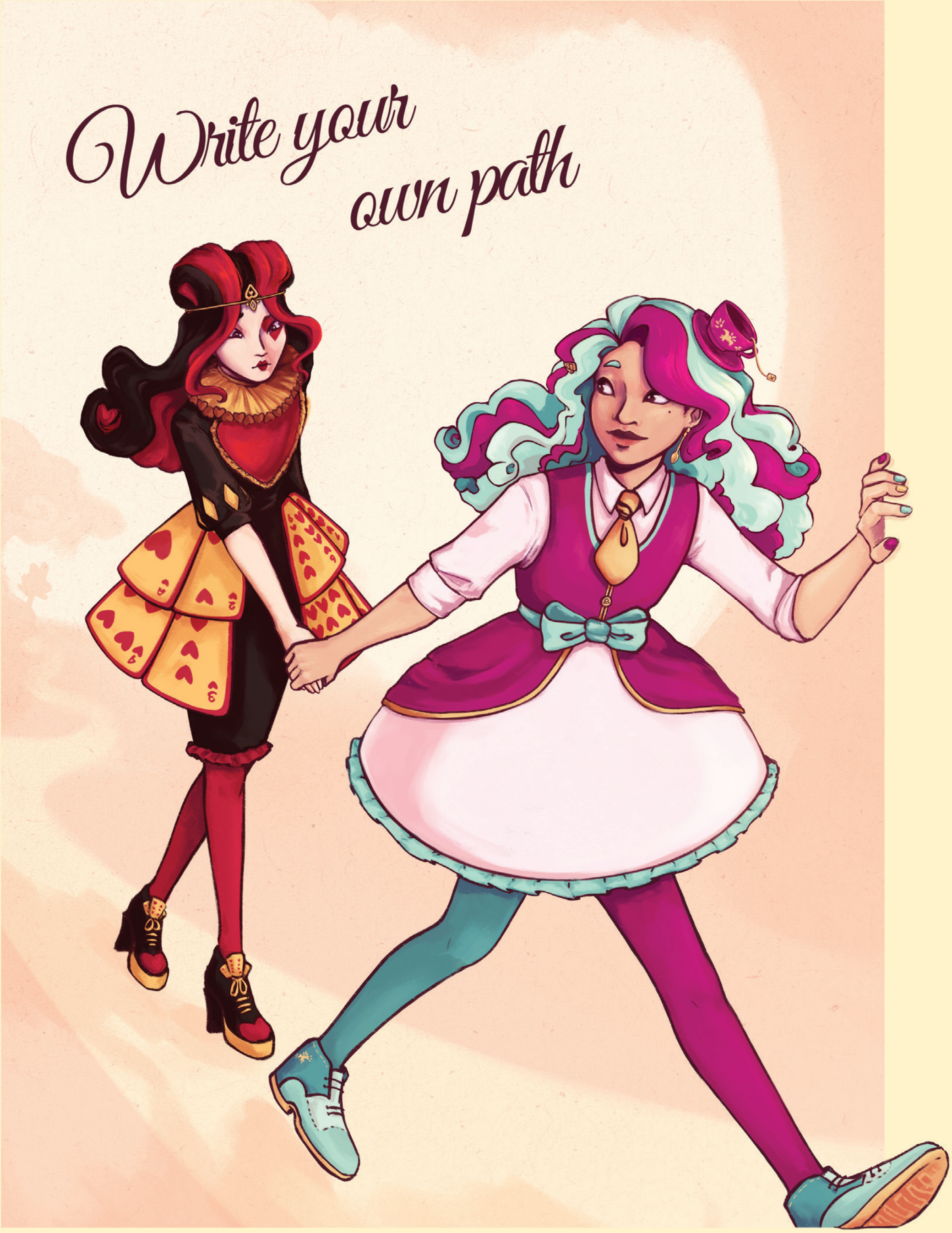
Cerise protested, “That was—”

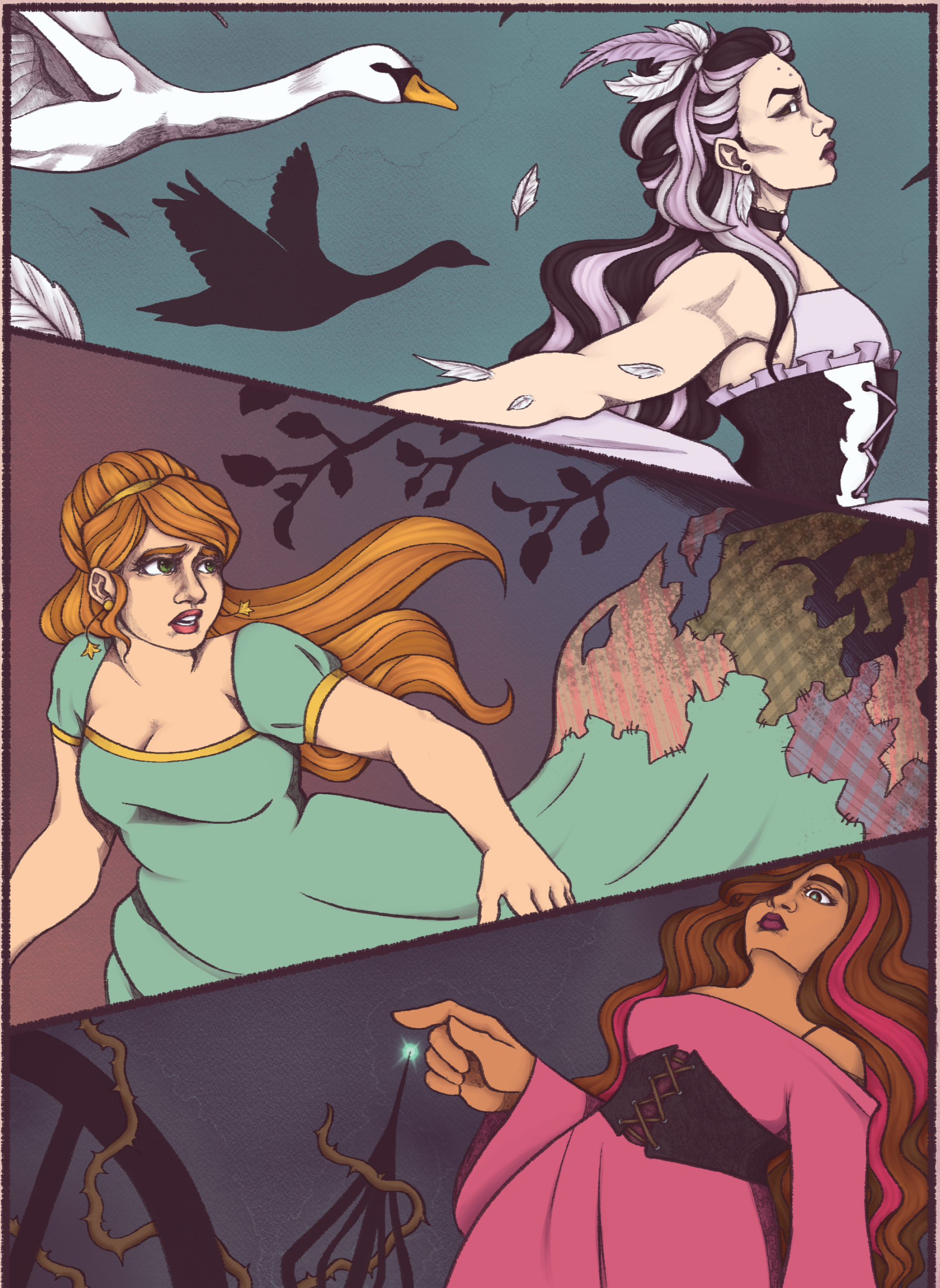
“I know, and I’m not saying you shouldn’t have,” her dad said. “I think Ramona just wants the chance to make a choice of her own.”

Alright, but why did she have to keep bringing Cerise into it? They were the same, both Hood and Wolf, there was no point provoking her except—

Except, everyone knew Cerise was a Hood, and her Wolf ears made her living proof, a symbol of their parents’ rebellion. Everyone knew Ramona was a Wolf, but even putting on a red cloak wouldn’t make anyone believe she was a Hood—she was and would remain, until Cerise said otherwise, just the daughter of a villain.

FOLLOW YOUR HEART


Write your own path



Tender Flame

by everafterwhat

"Duchess, please talk to me." Duchess could sense the torment in Sparrow's voice as he pleaded. She didn't move, pretending not to hear him.

A warm evening breeze caressed her arms, the last breath of summer; a goodbye. Duchess wasn't good at goodbyes. Sparrow stood below the balcony she was currently perched on, her thronework spread out on one of it's glittering tables. She tapped the tip of her quill against the page, forgetting everything she'd ever known as the sound of his voice reached her.

The sun had dipped low in the sky, golden shafts of light beginning to vanish as night crept in. Duchess should have gone back to her room ages ago but somewhere within her muddled mind, she had hoped Sparrow would come searching for her. She knew he stood only a few feet away; she could feel his eyes on her. Duchess thought she would be content, hearing how much he missed her, how much he cared. Instead, her throat tightened, her lips grew dry and tears tugged at her lashes as she fought to keep them from spilling.

It was True Hearts Day. Sparrow had wanted them to spend it together, just the two of them. She knew why. He was going to tell her he loved her.

She ended it with him before he could.

"Duchess, I know you can hear me; Please talk to me, I'm begging you." His voice broke, and though she couldn't see him, she could picture the angles of his face, his hair dancing in the evening breeze. Worst of all she could perfectly imagine the way his hands shook when he was

S.H
D+S

upset and sorrow deepening the green of his eyes. She clutched her quill harder, her knuckles whitening. The tip snapped as she tried to start up on her crownculus thronework, leaving an ugly mark on her paper that she would never be able to erase.

"Duchess, baby," Sparrow continued, "please explain to me what I did."

Duchess bristled; She had never liked it when he used pet names. It made everything feel too real. Her gut twisted with a myriad of emotions she didn't want to bother feeling. Duchess was all too aware of how quickly she'd be enveloped by her own mind, she had spent too many sleepless nights doing exactly that.

She stayed silent.

The sun sunk lower in the sky, robbing the sparkle from the glass tables and inviting a cool breeze that ruffled her skirt. Her skin erupted in goosebumps.

Sparrow finally did what he always did when she studied here; climbed the trellis to reach her. She heard the old wood groaning under his feet, the rustle of ivy as he yanked his way up, the scuff of his boots against the stone wall as he climbed. With the cracking of a branch, she knew he was closing the gap between them.

She didn't turn to face him.

"Baby, please—"

"Don't call me that," she said, the bite in her voice much colder than the breeze that tousled his hair.

"Duchess—"

"Sparrow." The finality of her tone should have dissuaded him, and it would have if only her voice hadn't wavered. A still silence fell between them for a moment before he spoke again, "What happened? Why did you do this?" She still couldn't face him. She knew she would cry. Duchess could smell his cologne, it would've been pleasant if it had not been infected with the scent of his shitty cigarettes. But it didn't matter to Duchess; she wanted to wrap herself up in the smell of him and never resurface. She wanted to be buried in his arms again. She wanted to be a *part* of him.

"It wasn't working," she said instead. She felt him advance, the tension growing like water against a dam.

"How? Duchess, I don't understand; everything was good." He was so close she could taste smoke on his breath.

Duchess didn't say anything, rather folded in on herself, as if she could physically keep herself together.

"What's going on?" Sparrow pressed.

A sudden surge of anger rose up in her. He had no right to press her on this. It wasn't his place, and it never would be. Duchess wouldn't let that happen. She couldn't let him in— he didn't deserve it. No one did.

She felt the heat of his hand before he touched her and she whipped around, snatching his wrist before he could. His bracelets bit into her palm, but she didn't release him. Furious tears burned her eyes, fire raged in the hollow of her chest but only for a moment. When she met his eyes, it all turned to ash.

He had been crying.

He wasn't high: she could tell by the steeliness of his gaze. His eyes were red and puffy, his lips broken and dry. The green of his eyes was striking, even in the low light that snuck through the doors back into the school. Her grip loosened, but she didn't want to let go. Sparrow smiled sadly, realization flooding his face,

"You knew I was going to tell you I love you." Duchess choked, her stomach dropping, her grip tightening; she couldn't speak. His eyes searched hers. She didn't know what he would find there.

They stood there, just barely illuminated by the golden light from the empty doorway. She didn't know what to say, she didn't know how to speak. He was till wearing that sad smile when he gently peeled her hand from his wrist. His hands were calloused but oh, so gentle. She'd missed their roughness, letting herself linger on the feeling of his skin brushing hers.

Sparrow took her cheek in his hand, his fingers snaking into the edge of her hairline as he held her, and she felt herself relax into him. He looked at her, strangely calm, brushing his thumb against her cheek. She felt her heartbeat slow, her hands stop their shaking, and her thoughts slow to a crawl. Duchess didn't move as he closed the small space still left between them. She only gazed into his eyes as he moved his hand to the base of her skull, holding her steady. She found herself gripping his shirt as their lips met, feeling herself melt into him like butter, and for a moment all she was was an endless eternity of warm, tender flames and sparkling rays of sunshine.

But he pulled away too soon, far too soon; and Duchess was back in the semi-darkness, the cool air quickly replacing the feeling of his body against hers. She could taste his cigarettes on her tongue, the ghost of his hair against her face, and her head abruptly felt heavy without his hand to support it.

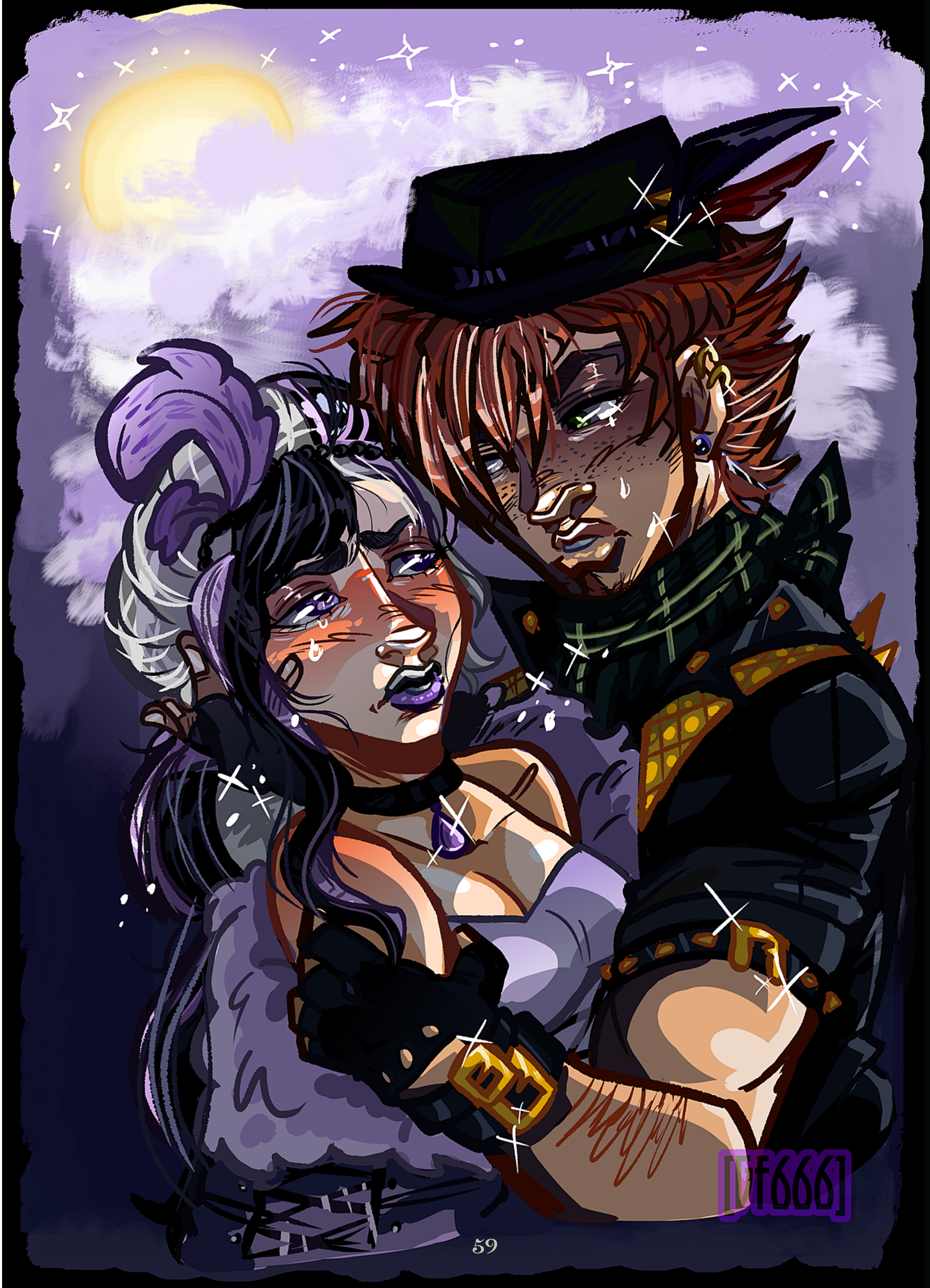
"I have something for you," he said.

"For me?"

"Yes," He pulled a blossom from out of his jacket pocket. "It belongs to you."

Instantly, she knew it was from the Heart Tree. It was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen, she had no idea how to react to something so achingly romantic. She stood there staring at it, a soft glow illuminating it from the inside, lighting Sparrow's hand with a soft pink glow. To accept this promise could seal his fate in death: a fate that would match hers. The look in his eyes told her he knew as much. Something within her tightened.

"Sparrow—"



[FF666]

"I love you, Duchess. With all of my heart." A gust of wind whipped his hair from his face, and the sincerity she saw there was like nothing she'd ever known. He'd never been this vulnerable, he'd never been this serious— she knew he couldn't handle it. Neither of them could. But he was trying anyway. "Please, take it. Even if you won't have me."

"I'm scared," she said, and like a candle in the sun, he softened.

"I know."

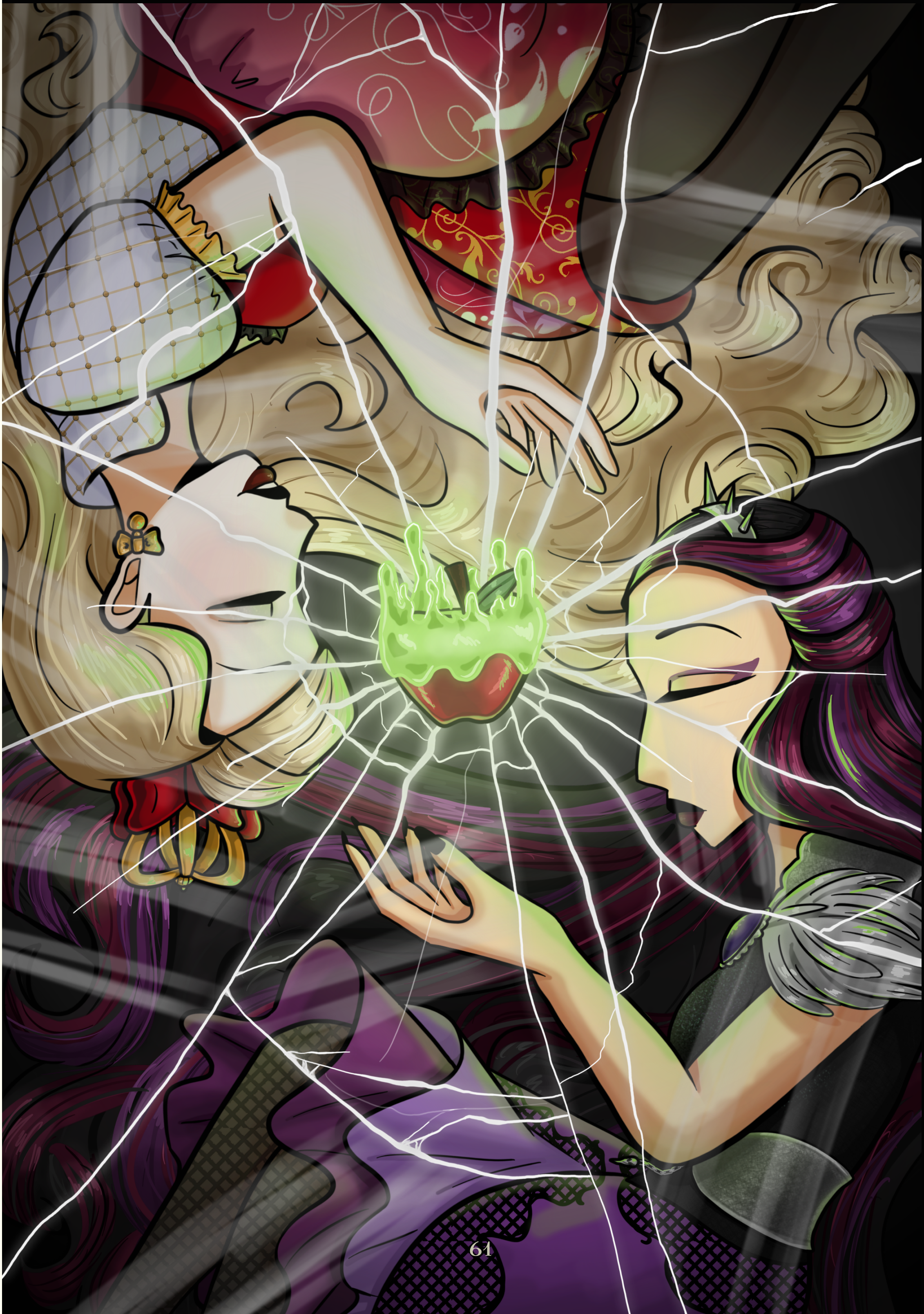
She made her way to him hesitantly, reaching for his face as if it were the first time she'd touched it. Duchess had never been the one to move first, she had always been terrified to admit she cared for him.

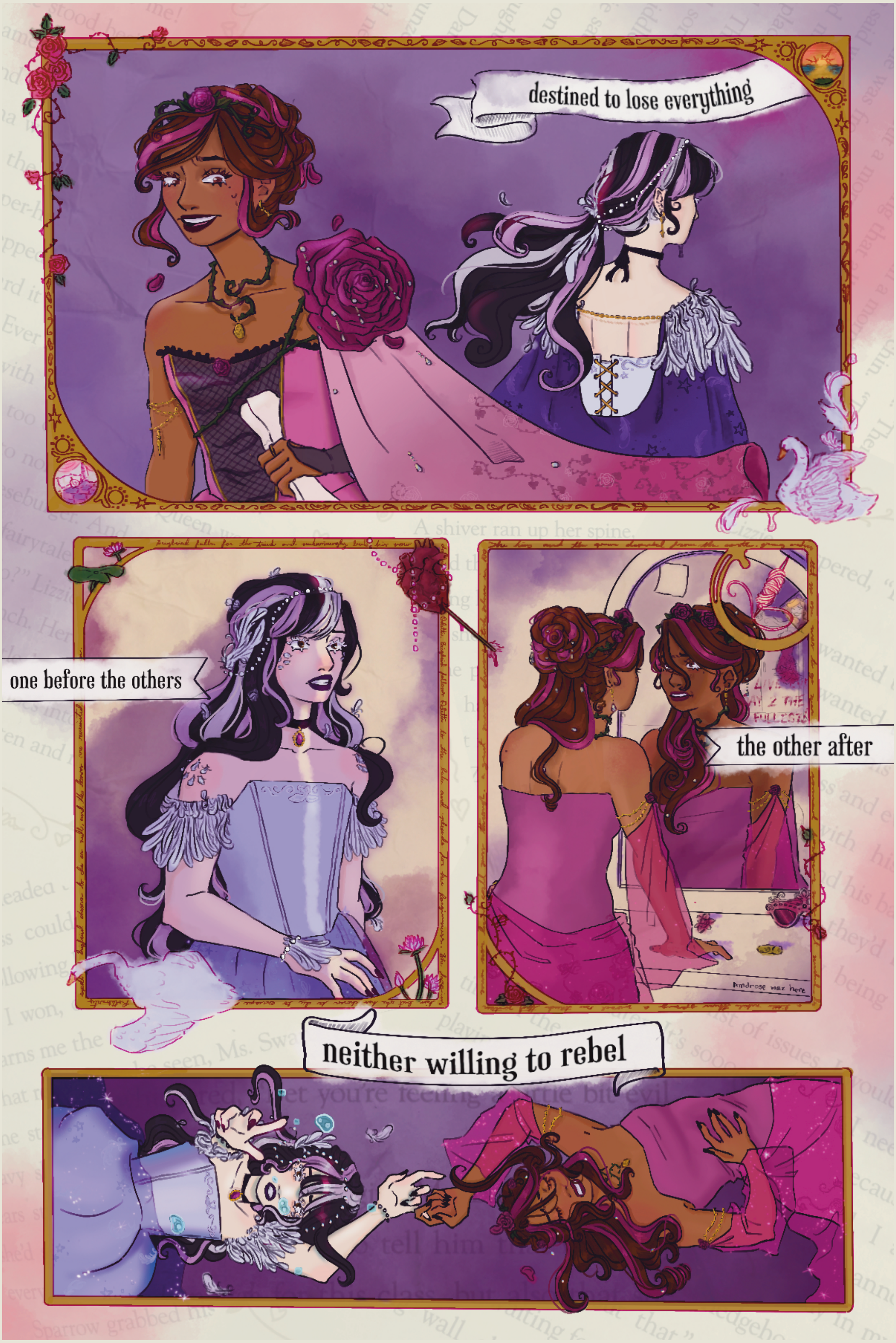
His breath came faster, unsure and expectant. She drank in the coarseness of the scruff on his face as she slid her hand up his jaw and into his copper hair. He leaned into her as she traced her fingertips across him, closing his eyes as she marked the angles of his face.

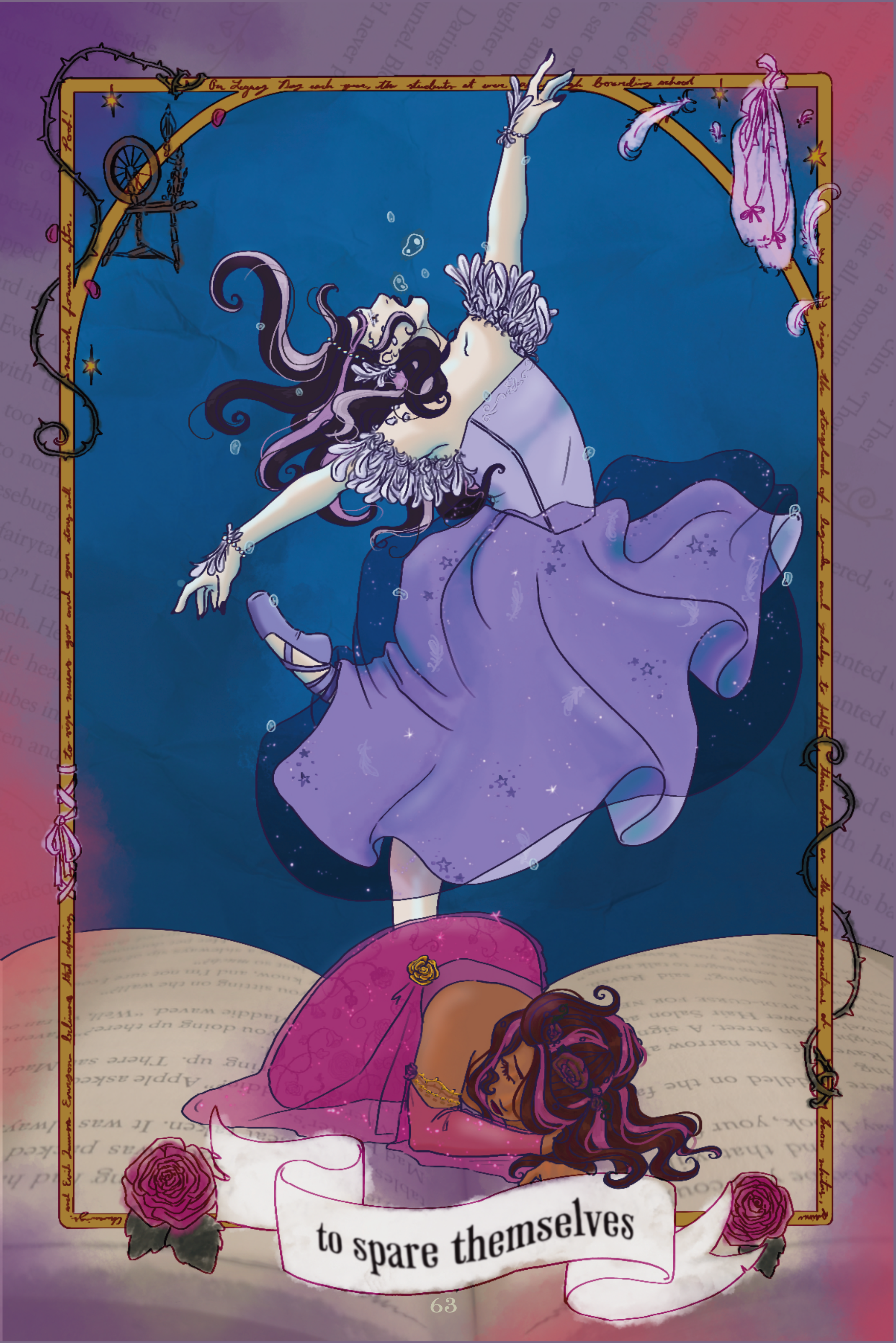
They were barely an inch away from each other now. She hesitated, looking into his eyes, feeling the quickness of his breath as it fought against hers. He didn't move, clutching the heart blossom in one hand, the other stiff at his side. She didn't think as she pulled him into her.

She felt him dissolve as she kissed him and she dissolved with him, his arms enveloping her as she hooked hers around his neck. The unsaid emotions she carried, she poured into him, selfishly keeping him from surfacing. That tender flame erupted and consumed them both. They kissed as though the world were ending around them. As if they were to die any second. As if they would never see one another again.

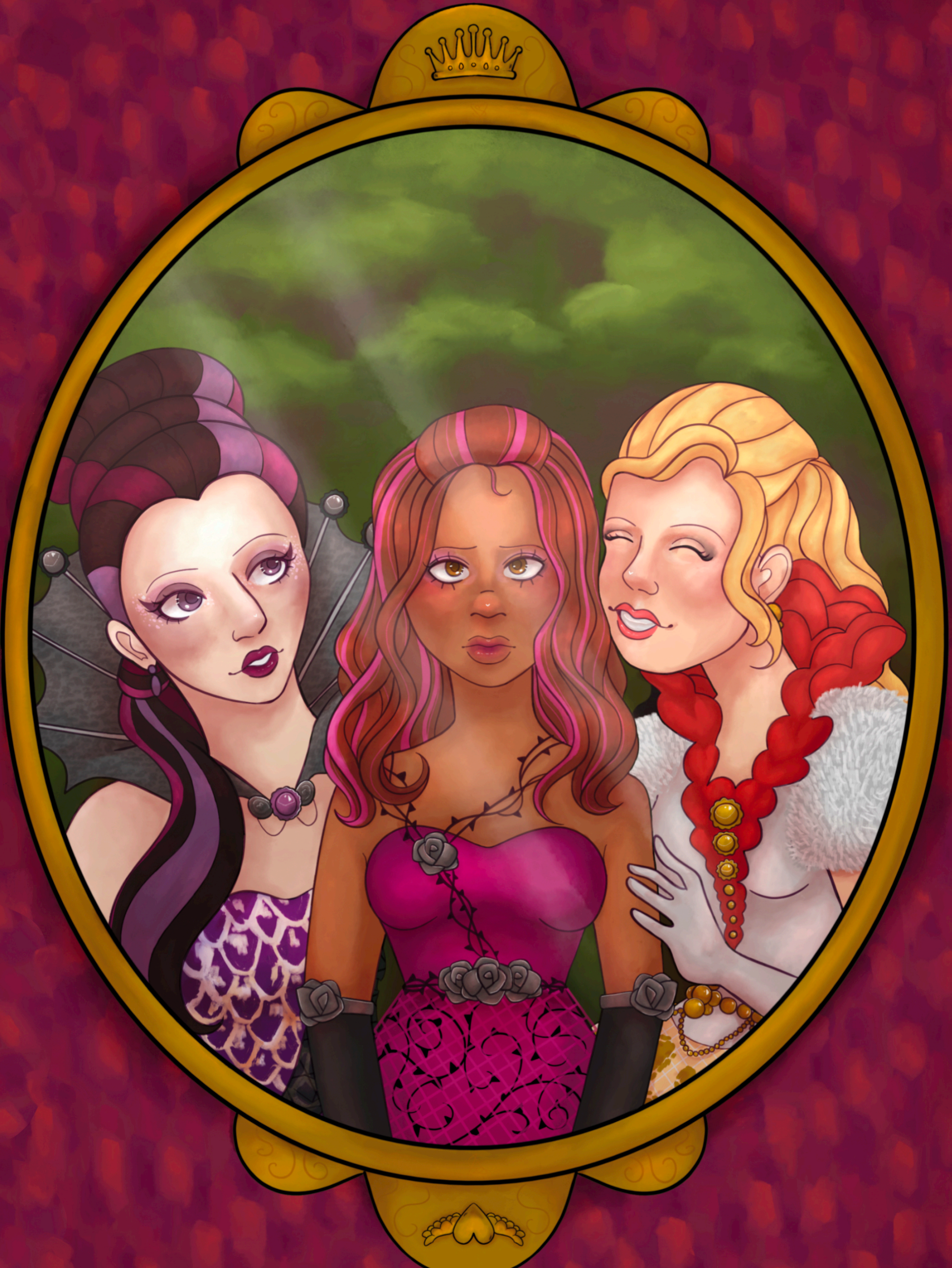
"I love you." She said, in the space between breaths.




destined to lose everything
one before the others
the other after
Amdrose waz here
neither willing to rebel


On Legacy Day each year, the students at ever
High boarding school
sign the storybook of legends and pledge to fulfill their destinies as the next generation of
Snow White,
Charming
and Evil Queen. Everyone believes that refusing to sign means you and your story will vanish forever after. Poof!

to spare themselves



Burning vs. Drowning

by royalrebelpropaganda

Darling finds Dexter out in the courtyard alone.

It's summer, so the gardens are lush and green. The area is lined with benches, and training gear is scattered around the area, only half-heartedly organized. The boys spend all their time out here when they're home. Darling spends her days inside, doing needlework, calligraphy, ballroom dance. Enduring the endless monotony.

Dex clearly has been sparring with Daring; he has the exhausted-frustrated pink-cheeked look on his face that only ever filters to the surface when he's losing badly. He was fairer about it than Daring was, good at laughing it off, but all the Charming boys hate to lose. He was running through forms with his sword again, contesting with an invisible enemy. When the threat was gone, Dex did brilliantly. Darling had seen them go toe to toe, and Daring swept easily every time. Dexter didn't hit hard enough, never reacted quickly enough. But his form was perfect.

"Hey," Darling says, slipping out from the doorway, through the flowing curtains. Dex startles, swordpoint skewing. That's what makes him lose to Daring every time. He wouldn't appreciate being told that, not now. Maybe not ever.

"Darling," he says. "Don't scare me like that. Have you been watching me?"

"No," Darling lies. "Grimm, it's hot outside. Where's Daring?"

"Probably gloating," Dexter says, falling back into form. His hair was falling loose, the stray strands sticking to his forehead from the sweat. "Or killing dragons somewhere. Whatever he does in the meantime."

"Between meals and beating you up," Darling says.

Dexter casts her a nasty sort of look, obscured through the glint of the light off his glasses. They keep slipping down his nose, but he needs them to fight, and he hates contacts. "Don't be like that. I don't need you here to—mess with me. Or whatever."

Darling pokes her tongue at her teeth, smoothing over her canines. The correct response is *Of course, I'm so sorry,* but Dex knows her too well. She fiddles with the hem of her corset. "I didn't mean it," she says, eventually. A compromise. "He hurt you?"

They only train with wooden blades at home, of course, but that's the farthest the parental supervision goes. Given that their father is always busy and their mother doesn't enjoy sitting around watching swordplay all day, they're frequently left alone. You can still do a lot of damage with baby teeth.

Dexter's jaw tenses, then he shrugs one shoulder. "No," he says.

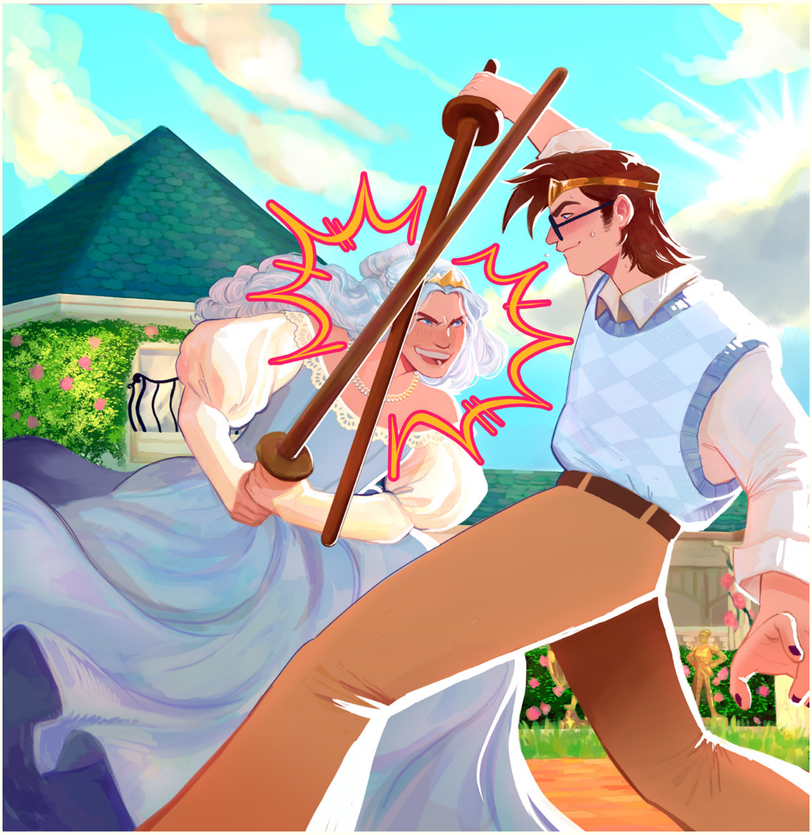
Practicing without armor is the stupidest thing they do. Darling's never understood that part. They have excuses, paragraphs of them, but Darling thinks they just like to hurt each other. "You're an idiot," she says. She crosses past Dexter through the courtyard to the weaponry kept on the stone benches. "Spar?"

Dex hesitates. "Now?"

"No, I dissolve in the sun like the Wicked Witch of the West," Darling says, picking up a practice sword and tossing it from hand to hand to orient herself to the weight of the wood, not steel. "Yes, now."

"I think it's water that killed her," Dexter says, and then yelps and ducks as Darling spins around, picking up the hem of her dress, and slashes at the area now right above his head with the sword. "A little warning?" he says, falling backwards into form, but his footing is too loose.

"You don't get a warning on the battlefield," Darling says, and then the game is on. Swordplay is one of those things Darling was supposed to have never learned, and so it had taken her years to get to this point.



But she is good. She knows she's good. She goes overhead to start, and he parries her hastily by doing more of throwing up his sword than any sort of counterattack. He's never quick enough. Pulls her sword back and stabs inward, going for the side. He sends that spinning outward, but he's working on defense, not offense.

They fight like they're dancing. Feet forward, feet back. The art of sword fighting is a noble one, and Dexter fights by the book. His steps are taken at ninety degrees, his elbows at sharp angles. His sword glances meaningless off of hers as he fails, again, to account for her fast reaction time, but he looks for all intents and purposes like the perfect prince he was supposed to be.

Darling's gown tangles around her feet and she stumbles, and he taps her on the shoulder and darts back. Light on his feet. Too light. She grits her teeth and presses forward, going aggressive where Dex was always playing defense.

He falters backwards, parrying again and again as Darling starts to slash over and over again, wood clattering against wood. She goes overhead again, and he catches it, but doesn't manage to catch the next one, which hits him in the ribs.

Dex makes a sick sound like a cat grabbed by the tail.

"Shoot," Darling says, dropping the sword. It makes no noise as it hits the soft ground, and she scrambles forward. Dex's hand is splayed over his ribs, but his other is still clenched around the handle of his weapon. "Dex, I'm sorry. I didn't..."

"It's fine," Dexter says through gritted teeth.

Darling guides him over to the stone bench. Dex doesn't look at her. She can never tell if he hates being treated like he's fragile, or if he doesn't. What it means if he doesn't. "Show me?" she asks.

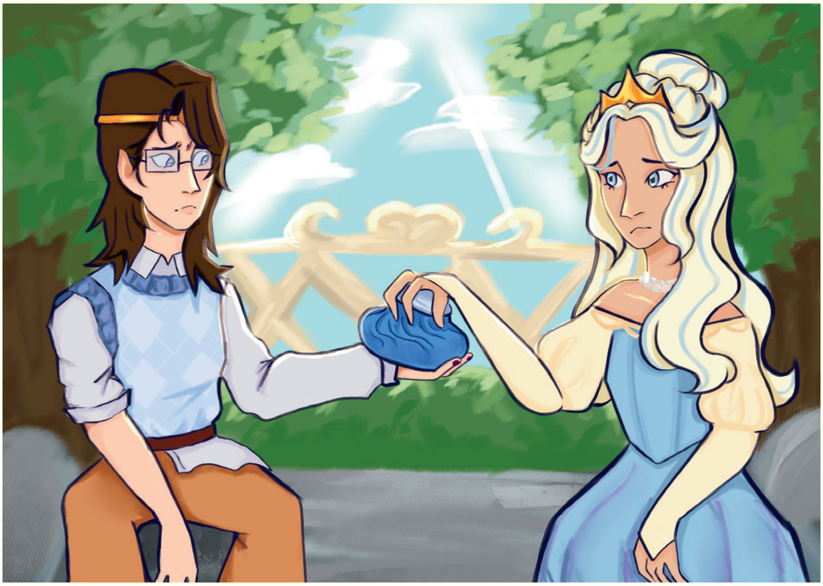
Dexter reluctantly picks at the hem of his shirt, and when it brushes up over his ribs, Darling hisses a breath through her teeth at the mottled map of olive-ugly sword lines over his chest, down his sides. "It's not a big deal," Dex says. "It's—it'll heal. It always does."

Dex doesn't protest enough to stop Darling from going back into the house and coming out with ice, wrapped in a cloth. When she sits back down beside him with ice, he hesitates until she pulls up his shirt for him and presses it to the wound, and he makes an un-princely half-strangled shriek in the back of his throat.

"This is why you're supposed to wear armor," Darling says.

"You think I don't know that?" Dexter says.

Darling becomes quiet as she moves the ice across the yellowing edges of the ink spill-dark bruises. "I know he's a lot," she says, eventually. She



presses down a little too hard, and Dex's jaw flexes as he grits his teeth.

"He doesn't mean to be."

Dexter turns his head to look at her. "I do miss when it used to just be that he would tackle me into the bedposts whenever he got too excited. Now it's… different. I feel less like a playmate and more like…" he trails off.

Target practice. Darling gets it. She notices, too, when Daring's blunt way of speaking slips from childish obliviousness to arrogant posturing. "I wish I could go toe to toe with him," Darling murmurs. "I wonder how he'd take losing."

"Confident," Dex says. "He *has* been doing this longer than you."

Darling frowns at him. "I could do it," she says.

"It doesn't matter," Dex says. "He'd never…"

Darling hands Dex the bag to take over the other side, but he just pulls down his shirt and holds the ice in his hands. Patches of the fabric have become darker from where the ice started to melt from the summer sun and Dexter's body heat.

"Do you think Daring ever thinks about all of this?" Dexter says suddenly. "All of what?" Darling says.

Dex casts her a flat glare. "You know."

"I don't," Darling says, playing the game. She's good at it, by now. Dexter isn't. He never had been.

"Don't be like that," Dexter says.

Darling sighs, blowing a strand of hair out from her face. "I don't think he does." "He has to," Dexter says. "He has to, right?"

"If he does, how does all of it not drive him crazy?" Darling asks, leaning back onto her palms. Her hands are cold from where she had been holding the ice, but sweat is dripping down the back of her neck. "I think he thinks about his picket-fence marriage to Apple and his five future kids and his title-only rule over a kingdom and feels fairly content and doesn't bother thinking too long about the rest of it."

Dexter doesn't say anything. He eventually moves the bag of his ice to his other side. It must be less than effective through the fabric, but Dex had always been weird about that. She'd seen him wear hoodies in the summer when he could get away with staying in the air-conditioned inside.

"Your hair is getting long," Darling says, reaching out and tugging at where the strands of his hair brush his shoulders.

"Yeah, I guess," Dexter says. "Just once, I'd think I'd like..." he doesn't finish the sentence. He sighs. "I don't want to fight with you, Darling."

"We're not fighting," Darling frowns at him.

"Physically," Dex says. "Fencing."

"Oh," Darling says. "Okay."

"You're good at it," Dexter says. "I know you want someone to practice with, I know that. I'm sorry. I'm a sore loser, I guess."

Darling considers him. Dex is staring at his hands, where the skin is turning ice-bitten pink. She considers all that jealousy swirling around inside, the ugly thing that is mad at him for not being better at the only thing she's wanted to do her whole life. She bites down on it.

"It's okay," Darling says. "It's..." she hesitates, stands back up. Does a twirl. The excess fabric of the dress wraps around on itself as she stops, and then spirals back out. She holds out a hand. "Here. Let's try something from my court."

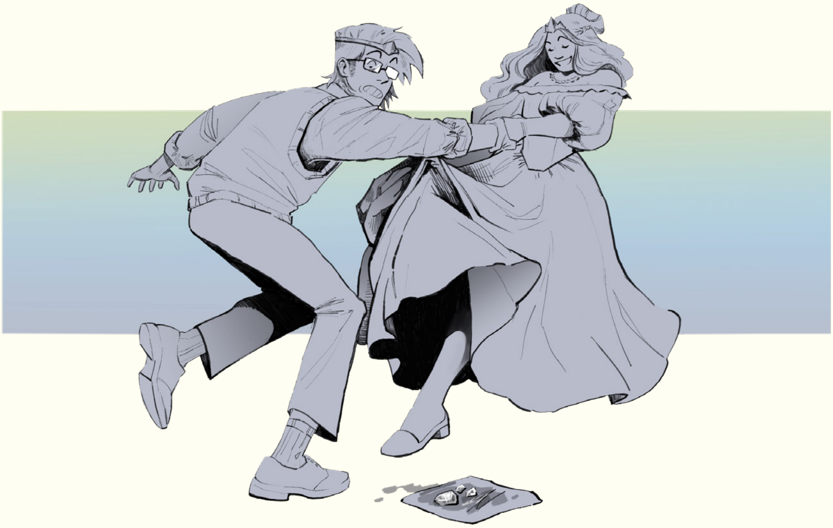
Dex eyes her warily. When placed next to Daring, it's always immediately apparent that the two of them have the same eyes. The difference is that on their own, Daring's eyes always seem to catch the light, sparkling an unnaturally brilliant shade of sapphire. Dexter's eyes, by contrast, only ever seem to be blue in the way the new moon's outline was still visible in the night sky.

"What are you doing?" he asks.

"Let's dance," she says.

"What?" Dexter says. "No."

"Why not?" Darling asks, and when Dex can't formulate a good re-



sponse in time, Darling grabs his wrists and tugs him up. The cloth hits the ground, unspooling, but the ice is mostly melted anyway, so it just drips water into the ground.

Dexter tries to put his hands in leading position and Darling readjusts them, placing his hand on her shoulder and interlacing their other fingers. He looks at her for a second, and then says, “I don’t know how to follow.”

“That’s okay,” Darling says. “Just mirror what I do.”

They dance like they’re fighting. Darling’s steps are as confident as they always are, and Dex moves deftly in her shadow. She presses his hand to her back and twirls them around, and he stumbles, but she rights him. He grimaces and re-corrects them, pressing against her in a way that makes her feel like he wants to hit her.

Darling dips him sharply and he yelps and grabs at her shoulder in a way that almost hurts. He laughs a little as they stand back up, and when she goes to move again he stands still, rooted against Darling’s eternal momentum.

When she raises an eyebrow at him, he says, “Thank you.”

Darling shrugs. She lets go of his hand to smooth over his shoulders, fixing the lines of his stupid sweater. “What are sisters for?” she asks eventually, and smiles at him, and he smiles back. That was all there was to it.

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Thank you!
♥Paloma♥

i had so much fun working with all of you!
- Jellyfish

thank you!
-lesbian briars

Thank you!
♥mcurii

Thank you!

THANKS!
hoodhollow

Thank You
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thank you!
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Thank you!
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-Riff

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♡ ISMOIRAE

Thank you
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Thank you!
-Amber

THANKS!
Nebula

Thank ♡
you!! ♡
-Bubbly Washing machine

THANK YOU!

hi! i've had a wonder-landiful time on this zine ♥ LOTS of LOVE to everyone ♥!!
nothingloseehd

thank you!
-@torgwn